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# **Stepmothering and identity: A synthetic narrative-discursive analysis.**

**Thesis submitted for PhD  
Department of Psychology  
The Open University**

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25th October 2016**

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## **Abstract**

In Britain in the twenty-first century stepfamilies are numerically common but difficult to define since they may cross household boundaries. This has meant that stepmother families, who are often non-residential, are rarely included in research and there is a very limited literature which considers the perspectives of stepmothers themselves. However, there have been research findings suggesting greater stress for stepmothers than stepfathers. In a neoliberal climate there are increasing demands on parents, including fathers who do not live with the biological mother of their children, and this may contribute to particular stresses for stepmother families. This research used a synthetic narrative-discursive methodological approach, underpinned by feminist theory, to explore the identity work undertaken by stepmothers. In order to maximise the diversity of participants, data were drawn from a web forum for stepmothers and interviews with stepmothers of adult stepchildren. The analysis considers the discursive resources drawn upon as stepmothers negotiate potentially troubled identities. The empirical work is presented in three chapters: the first considers stepmothers talk about their (male) partners in which the men were often constructed as hapless, helpless or hopeless. The second looks at talk of home both as a physical and a relational space. In this stepmothers frequently demonstrated their own feelings of both invasion and exclusion, often not feeling 'at home'. The third explores stepmothers' talk in which the biological mothers of their stepchildren are often constructed as mad, bad and sometimes dangerous. The concluding chapter summarises the particular troubles with which stepmothers must contend



highlighting the discursive resources that are drawn on and the constraints that these impose. Theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions are discussed including suggestions for policy. There are also discussions of future possibilities for extensions to this research exploring the experiences of the growing number of families with adult stepchildren.

## **Preface**

### **Cinderella: The stepmother's tale**

Once upon a time.... No, that won't do, this is no fairy tale. Here's how it really was:

It was terrible when Richard died, and it went on being terrible day after day. I was a mess... you don't expect it do you? Widowed at just thirty two and with my girls still so young. But I had to be strong for them, I had to keep going. Then, of course, there were the financial problems; he'd had no life insurance, he didn't expect to die and I was only working part-time, so much changed. We moved from our lovely house into a flat and eventually I started working full time. The girls were growing up but it was getting the job with George's firm that started me on the path to becoming a stepmother. George was a good boss, a kind man and we got on right from the start. Then when I found out he was on his own with a young daughter, well I felt so sorry for him and the poor little thing needed a mother and George was well meaning but really he had no idea how to cope with Ella. We used to talk in the office; I'd even give him advice sometimes. We'd go for a drink occasionally and then it was dinner, although that was often difficult as he was always anxious about leaving Ella with a babysitter.

After a while I became aware that George was having financial problems. His business wasn't doing well and it was difficult for him to give that the attention it needed and to be around for Ella. So we moved in with George. Selling my flat released quite a bit of equity and I gave that to George to reduce his debts. My girls

were thrilled. His house was so much bigger than our flat and they each got a bedroom of their own. I was able to re-organise my working hours so that I was always there when all the girls came home from school, I could be there for them. The house was lovely but I found it quite hard to settle in, it just wasn't my home. All the décor had been chosen by Ella's mother and Ella delighted in reminding me (and any friends I had visiting) that 'my mum chose this colour scheme'. Then there were the family photographs, many featuring Ella's mother. I did talk to George about it and I wondered if we might move to somewhere that would really be ours but he was worried about the cost and the effect on Ella; more change, more upset. So we stayed and I just had to get on with it. George did tell me to do whatever I wanted with the place so I gradually made small changes. I took down the photos in the living room and suggested to Ella that she might like to keep them in her bedroom. She added them to what already amounted to a shrine to her mother.

I knew that Ella wasn't really happy about us moving in; she'd been upset when George told her but he felt sure that I'd soon win her over and all would be well. We hoped she'd realise how much better it was for her to have someone to look after her properly; to make sure she had clean clothes and was well fed, to do all the things a mother does. Mealtimes were the worst. Of course, George had been too soft with her - she was spoilt. If Ella wanted fish fingers for every meal George was not going to argue. On our first night there I'd planned and cooked a special meal, I really wanted us all to enjoy being together but Ella took one look and refused to eat it. She even accused me of trying to poison her! George just said

mildly 'would you like some fish fingers darling?' and rushed off to the kitchen.

Later, I told him how upsetting that was for me after putting a lot of effort into that meal and I pointed out that Ella's eating habits were very unhealthy. He promised to talk to her but there was little change for a very long time. Eventually we married; Ella sulked. Things did improve a little but she continued to be difficult, refusing to help out when I asked all the girls to take on a few chores as they got older and accusing me of making her my slave! I'd only asked her to empty the dishwasher.

Then came the school disco; what a lot of trouble that caused. Both of my girls had weekend jobs by that time and they'd each bought themselves a new outfit for the disco. Ella also demanded something new but money was still tight and she'd had several new things only a few weeks earlier. I gently suggested that her blue dress would be perfect only to be accused of wanting to see her in rags. When my two were modelling their new things for us to admire Ella really went too far calling them the ugly sisters. George, as always, kept out of it. A few days before the great event Ella had a phone call, her long absent mother was back in the country for a few days and wanted to visit. Ella was absolutely delighted although she hadn't seen the woman for several years, honestly, what sort of woman walks out on her child? It does amaze me that George ever married such a selfish person. When she arrived she whisked Ella off on a shopping spree and when they returned Ella had a new designer dress and some obviously expensive and very unsuitable shoes.

On the night of the disco I'd offered to drive all the girls up to the school, they planned to walk back (it isn't far) and we'd told them to stay together and be back

by midnight. But Ella wouldn't come with us and was looking out of the window in some agitation until finally a stretch limo arrived – just for her and courtesy of her mother. George and I had a quiet evening and my girls arrived back just about on time but Ella was not with them. Apparently she'd spent most of the evening with Jamie Prince, a boy that all the girls at school were keen on. She turned up almost an hour late, sneaking into her room before we'd heard her, but she was finally home. We all went to bed. The next day, the Prince boy turned up with something in a bag that he tried to keep hidden from us. I found out later it was one her lovely new shoes, she'd broken the heel but why he had it I never discovered. I did find her new designer dress where she'd thrown it under her bed; it was badly stained and ripped making me wonder what she'd been doing. I didn't have to wonder for long. A few weeks afterwards it became apparent that she and the Prince boy had become more than friendly. He wanted nothing to do with the consequences; he was older than her and about to go off to university. Ella was adamant that she wanted to keep the baby and George and I were adamant that she needed to finish her education. So that is why I am here taking care of our grandson, little George. There are some compensations for the trials of being a stepmother.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1. Introduction**

##### *1.11. The importance of narrative*

This thesis began with a preface telling a version of the tale of Cinderella but by changing the perspective to that of the stepmother, the stepmother takes centre stage and it is the experiences of stepmothers that are central to this research. This preface also hints at an epistemological approach that challenges belief in one discoverable truth. Because the story, from the perspective of the stepdaughter, is well-known, this re-telling highlights the impact of a different viewpoint. This emphasises the way that language is not directly referential, it does not simply tell us what is there, rather, meaning is made in the talk (Gergen, 1985; Taylor, 2007). In addition, this storied approach recognises the importance of narrative to individual identity; we tell and retell the stories of our lives and this autobiographical talk is also constitutive, a site in which identity is both actively constructed and also negotiated in relation to the constraints of wider social meanings or discursive resources (Taylor & Littleton, 2006; Taylor, 2007). There are different approaches to discourse analysis and different understandings of the terms narrative and identity. The epistemological and methodological approach taken in this research, including the way that these terms are understood is explored in chapter three. At this stage, however, I simply note that the importance of narrative informs the approach taken to analysis in this research and this is recognised in my questions to the stepmothers who took part in the

interview phase of this study; I asked them to tell me their stories. Like the stepmother in the preface these women all had adult stepchildren and would therefore be excluded from most previous stepfamily research where the focus has usually been on families with children under eighteen (Corrie, 2002).

#### *1.12. The wicked stepmother myth*

The preface to this thesis also references an issue that is difficult to ignore in any research on stepmothering; the portrayal of stepmothers in fairy tales and myths. This is particularly the case for a work that has an interest in societal discourses and their impact on individual identity. The word stepmother invites the adjective wicked because stories of wicked stepmothers are prevalent across time and cultures (Ashliman, Garry & El-Shamy, 2005). For example, an Iraqi folktale includes the proverbial statement 'Stepmothers hate their husband's children' (Bushnaq, 1986, 181) and stepmothers are also shown to treat their stepchildren badly in fairy tales such as 'Snow White', 'Hansel & Gretel' and 'Cinderella' (Ashliman, et al., 2005). However, many of these stories have multiple variations and sometimes the wicked character in the original folktale was actually a mother (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). When the brothers Grimm wrote up many of these traditional tales for publication, they often changed the mother to a stepmother in order to make the stories more socially acceptable. In this way the stepmother became the villain and an image of loving motherhood could be maintained (Collins, 1988). That stepparents are frequently portrayed in fairy tales may be unsurprising as these stories developed in a pre-industrial era when stepfamilies were common following

the death of a spouse so that many children experienced living with a stepparent. That stepparents are often vilified may also relate to children's ambivalent feelings towards parental authority with fairy tales offering a socially acceptable release for aggression and a fantasy of revenge against such authority (Bettelheim, 1976) since in fairy tales the bad usually end unhappily and sometimes quite gruesomely. Evolutionary theory might suggest that stepparents would invest more in biological children (their own genetic material) than in stepchildren and some studies offer limited support for this view (e.g. Daly & Wilson, 1985; Case, Lin and McLanahan, 2001). The suggestions that these fairy stories help children to deal with conflicted feelings and that stepparents favour their biological children may be convincing, but these factors do not explain the gender bias that is evident; it is invariably stepmothers rather than stepfathers who are cast as the villains and more often stepdaughters than stepsons who suffer at their hands (Ashliman, et al., 2005). This might seem surprising as women were usually the narrators of such stories. However, two possible accounts have been put forward in explanation. Firstly, myths are recurring themes incorporating cultural standards (Birenbaum, 1988) and Levorato (2003) suggests that such gendered stories played a part in socialising children into the prevailing patriarchal society where it was less acceptable to denigrate men than women. They were thus used to teach children the morals, social values and manners of their time (Levorato, 2003; Smith 1990). Secondly, by telling such stories the female narrators cast themselves in a positive light in contrast with the mythical wicked stepmother (Ashliman et al., 2005). There is another fascinating aspect to these stories which is the relative absence of the



father who rarely prevents the stepmother from mistreating his children. I would argue, therefore that the myth remains prevalent and highly gendered and may still have the potential to impact modern stepmothering identity. For this reason my preface is based on a retelling of the Cinderella story.

### *1.13. Why research stepmothers?*

My preface is a fiction but it does utilise elements of stories told by the stepmothers who participated in this research and there is, in this, a desire to show that this work is, at least in part, about allowing their stories to be told. This is not to suggest that this 'gives a voice' to these stepmothers since it is only possible to give voice to a researched population in a way that is always mediated by the researcher. It is the researcher who has power in the research relationship and it is the researcher who decides which questions will be asked, how the data will be analysed and what will be included in the write up (Bhavnani, 1990). Recognising the importance of the researcher within the research and in order to address such power imbalances, many feminist researchers have proposed the use of reflexivity (e.g. Finlay, 2002; Wilkinson, 1988), that is an acknowledgement of what the researcher brings to the research and the inherent power relations (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999; Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002). Informed by this and recognising that my own status as a stepmother is pertinent, there is a commitment to reflexivity within the current project and this will be discussed in more detail in reference to methodology in chapter three.

The reasons for choosing to conduct research in this area will be expanded in chapter two in relation to previous research but they also include my own experience as a stepmother and personal observation of the difficulties that can be associated with stepmothering. The work is driven by feminist concerns and like much feminist research and theorising it attempts to better understand the way that gender inequalities are manifested in women's social roles and lived experience. Under patriarchy women's opportunities for power have been limited and families are key sites for the experience and reproduction of both oppression and privilege (Allen, Lloyd & Few, 2009). Some years ago Wall (2001) suggested that feminists should pay particular attention to what is being said about mothers, and whilst women do now have access to many roles in society, there is still a need to better understand the inequalities they continue to face and family, home and mothering remain important for women's status and identity. Miller (2007), in her work on the transition to motherhood, expands this to consider the importance for feminist research, not just of what is said about mothers, but how women themselves draw on and make sense of dominant discourses of mothering. Miller (2007) points to the differences between ideas of mothering and the experience of mothering itself. Such differences must surely also be pertinent for stepmothers since this is a route to mothering which is less normative and where there is arguably often less support or guidance than for women becoming either biological or adoptive mothers.

Frost, Capdevila and Johnson (2015) draw attention to the issue of agency in relation to women's choices about becoming (or not becoming) mothers as well as

their motherhood practices in the current western neo-liberal context. Whilst there are challenges for all women in making such 'choices', stepmothering is not usually chosen as a route to motherhood, rather it is a consequence of the choice of a partner. In this way becoming a stepmother does not conform to the canonical narratives (Bruner, 1987) of a woman's life, that is, it does not follow an expected trajectory of romantic love and coupledness followed at a later date by children and family. The continuing importance, for feminist research, of women's understandings of motherhood together with the potential difficulties of stepmothering as a route to motherhood therefore makes this an important topic for research.

In addition, it has been suggested that dependent children play an important role in the maintenance of adequate moral identities (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gillies, 2003). Whilst this is true for adults in all types of family it has a particular resonance in stepfamilies because much of the research has suggested that children face challenges resulting from the divorce or separation of their biological parents and from parental re-partnering. The implication that children may suffer thus places adults in stepfamilies in a particularly difficult situation in respect to their moral identity. This may be compounded since in a stepfamily, ideas of self-development, couple intimacy and self-care may be in tension with those of responsibilities to children (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gillies, 2003). A further issue is that stepfamilies themselves do not fit with ideas of the stereotypical biological, nuclear family. This may mean that all members of a stepfamily, including stepmothers, are marginalised. One aspect of this that is highlighted in

several research studies (e.g. Fine, 1995; Fellman, Galan & Lloreda, 2008) is the role ambiguity and consequent strain that is often faced by stepmothers; they lack a clear model for their role. This marginalisation may create difficulties for stepmothers, especially in the early stages of their stepmothering relationships. Taylor and Littleton (2005) suggest that novices (in the creative world) may have particular difficulties as they explore and construct a new identity, making their talk a useful site to understand how such identities are taken up. Similarly, stepmothers entering new relationships and taking on new roles are also attempting to construct new (and morally acceptable) identities. They may also face a lack of discursive resources that resonate with their own lives and the resources that are available may be associated with undesirable identities such as ‘the wicked stepmother’. Their identities may therefore be ‘troubled’ (Taylor & Littleton, 2006), making them difficult to construct because of the tensions between different elements. This concept of trouble will be discussed more fully in chapter three and a consideration of the literature in chapter two will expand on some of the difficulties faced by stepmothers. However, at this stage a recognition that mothering remains an important area for feminist research and that stepmothers face particular challenges, informs the reason for the present study.

## **1.2. Definitions**

It is common, in an introduction, to offer definitions, but stepmothers, and indeed stepfamilies, can be surprisingly difficult to define. Indeed, as Braithwaite, Baxter

and Harper said back in 1998 (pg.101), stepfamilies are 'represented by multiple forms that defy simple definition'. Consider the following examples:

- Vicky was a single woman in her early forties until she married Mike, a widower in his fifties. Mike has two adult children who have their own homes. Mike's son has two daughters. Mike and Vicky have now had a daughter of their own.
- In her thirties Anna was divorced with two young children. She met and married John who was also divorced and had two children close in age to Anna's. Anna's children lived with her and John, while John's children lived with their mother and stepfather but spent many weekends and holidays with Anna and John. After eight years Anna and John divorced and for a time neither had contact with their stepchildren. All the children are now adults and Anna has recently renewed contact with John's children. She still considers herself a stepmother.
- Brian and Jennifer are a married couple in their early sixties. Jennifer had two children from two previous relationships when she married Brian and they have had two daughters together. All these children are now adults. Brian has a seven-year-old son, Rory, as a result of an extramarital affair with a much younger woman. When Rory's mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer she asked Brian to give Rory a home after her death. Rory now lives with Brian and Jennifer and it is Jennifer who provides much of his daily care.

- Penny and Alan are cohabiting. They have a daughter together who is now in her early twenties. Alan was previously cohabiting with Jane and they have a son who now lives with his mother. Jane also had a daughter prior to meeting Alan and this daughter lived with Jane and Alan for many years. Both Alan's son and his stepdaughter remain in close contact with Alan and Penny.

These are fictional or fictionalised accounts, some based on women who took part in this research and some taken from the long running BBC Radio 4 soap opera 'The Archers' but even such media representations do mirror just some of the diverse family situations that are being experienced by real individuals. These examples highlight both the diversity of stepfamilies and some of the definitional issues that arise within the stepfamily literature. What constitutes a stepfamily and how is it to be defined? Definitions are also pertinent for individuals who may self-define as members of a stepfamily when others might not define them in this way.

Alternatively some might not define themselves as stepfamily members despite meeting definitional criteria set by others. This is particularly pertinent for the study of stepmothers since Hadfield and Nixon (2013) found in their Irish study that around ten percent of stepfamilies did not identify themselves as such and these non-self-identifying families were more likely to be stepmother families. In the examples given above, Anna would not be considered a stepmother by most definitions since she is no longer married to the children's father. Similarly, Alan still considers himself a stepfather to Jane's daughter and Penny considers both Alan's son and stepdaughter to be her stepchildren. Vicky's 'stepchildren' were

both adults when she met their father and this family would not meet the 'step' criterion in many studies where the presence of children under the age of eighteen is a prerequisite (Trost, 1997; Corrie, 2002). Penny and Alan would have been excluded from much stepfamily research because they are cohabiting. Until fairly recently most stepfamily studies considered only married couples (Sweeney, 2010). However, according to Wineberg and McCarthy (1998), cohabiting couples are more likely to enter a new union with children from previous relationships than are remarried couples. Additionally, Anna's situation highlights the fact that stepparents rarely have any legal status in the lives of their stepchildren, regardless of their level of involvement (Edwards, Bak-Wiklund, Bak & Ribbens McCarthy, 2002). Although Anna felt herself to be very close to John's children it was difficult for her to maintain contact with them whilst they were still under the age of eighteen. Thus the legal position can become particularly salient when the relationship with the biological parent ends, either through death, or through divorce or separation. Although Anna was married to John, his children never lived with them full time. Even during their marriage this would have excluded them from most stepfamily studies where part-time (often called non-residential) involvements are rarely included and the focus is instead on a single household. In practice, many children divide their time between two (or more) households which might all be considered stepfamilies. For example, Alan's stepdaughter lived mostly with her mother but also spent time with Alan and Penny and with her biological father and his new partner. Brian and Jennifer would be considered a stepfamily by most definitions but this would relate only to Brian's status as a stepfather to

Jennifer's children from her previous relationships. Definitions within the literature would rarely include a child born after the start of the current relationship.

However, this is not merely a fictional device. On the web forum for stepmothers used to gather some of the data for this research, there are two women who identify themselves as stepmothers where their stepchildren postdate their relationship (in one case marriage) to the child's father.

Yet this is not a comprehensive list of the types of families often or usually excluded from stepfamily research. Consider Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships where two adults consider themselves to be a couple but do not live together on a full time basis either for practical reasons (such as work) or through personal preference (Trost, 1997). It is estimated that around ten percent of couples are now in such relationships (Gabb, Klett-Davies, Fink, & Thomae, 2014). Where either partner in such a situation has children from another relationship, they are most likely to be considered a single parent family rather than a stepfamily. Also usually excluded are non-heterosexual stepfamilies. Although there have been a number of studies of lesbian and gay parents since the 1980's most have considered multiple avenues to parenting rather than being focussed on stepfamily issues (Parks, 1998; Sweeney, 2010). One exception is Moore's (2008) work on black lesbian stepfamilies. Noting that previous research had mainly considered the experiences of white, middle- and upper-income women, Moore explored the division of economic provision and of housework and childcare to evaluate findings from previous research that suggested equality in these areas as defining features of lesbian-headed households. Moore (2008) found that in her



study partners shared economic provision but that, because of their legal ties and parental responsibility, biological mothers undertook a greater share of housework and that this gave them greater control over organisation, finances and childrearing in the relationship. Although this study did consider a very underrepresented group, it is still the case that to date, some types of stepfamilies, and hence some types of stepmothers, specifically those who are white, heterosexual, married and living full time with their husbands and stepchildren under the age of eighteen, are more likely than others to feature in research. In 2000 Coleman, Ganong and Fine reviewed research in the area over the previous decade and suggested that new insights would be gained by attending to 'non-traditional' stepfamilies; ten years later Sweeney (2010) similarly suggested that more work was still needed to enhance understanding of diversity in stepfamilies. However, there are some indications of change in the recognition of stepfamily diversity with one recent and one forthcoming publication. In the first, Pryor (2014) is concerned with differences between stepfamilies rather than making comparisons with other family types. She considers stepfamily variations based on structural factors such as gender, sexuality (including a chapter on same sex families), race and ethnicity and process such as pathways to stepfamily formation, parenting and stepparenting. In the second, Ganong and Coleman (2017) include a chapter on gay and lesbian couples in stepfamilies in their forthcoming book.

Although, as this discussion has demonstrated, stepfamilies themselves are difficult to define, there are some terms used in the literature which it will be useful to define at this stage. The first terms relate to who brings biological children into the

new stepfamily. The label 'complex' is used to indicate that both adults bring children to the new relationship, while the label 'simple' indicates that just one adult has children from a previous relationship. Of course, in both of these the new couple may then go on to have further children although no specific labels are used for such families. As I have already discussed, after parental separation children may spend time in more than one household and the second set of definitional terms relates to the amount of time children spend in a specific stepfamily household. Where the child lives mainly in the household they are considered to be 'residential' and a stepmother in such a household would be termed a 'residential stepmother' although some authors would refer to her as a 'full-time stepmother'. Despite the 'full-time' label such a child might still spend some time in another household (for example with the biological mother). Where the child is mainly domiciled in another household the stepfamily where they visit or in which they spend less time is referred to as 'non-residential' and a stepmother in this situation is either a 'non-residential stepmother' or a 'part-time' stepmother. This can be confusing as some children divide their time equally between households with parents having joint custody. These are sometimes referred to as 'evenly residential' or 'fifty percent residential'.

### ***1.3 Trends***

There have been major transformations in family life over recent years with a wide variety of family forms now co-existing and further radical shifts likely (Gabb & Silva, 2011; Hunt, 2009). For example, in the UK the percentage of adults living in

one-person households has doubled over the last fifty years (Gabb & Silva, 2011) with 7.7 million people living alone in 2015 (Office of National Statistics, 2015). Additionally, although the overall number of divorces annually fell slightly between 2003 and 2013, (Office of National Statistics, 2015), a high divorce rate over many years has resulted in an increase in the relative number of divorced people (Hunt, 2009). According to the Office of National Statistics (2015), single parent families represent twenty-five percent of all families with dependent children and a quarter of all UK children live with a lone parent. Cohabitation rates continue to rise with cohabiting families the fastest growing family type (Office of National Statistics, 2015) and sixty-five percent of cohabiting relationships where there is a child will dissolve, which is more than twice the rate for equivalent married couples (Hunt, 2009). According to the 2011 census 1.1 million dependent children in England and Wales live in stepfamilies and eleven percent of families with dependent children are stepfamilies (Office of National Statistics, 2014). Given the definitional issues discussed earlier this is likely to be an underestimation as the British census data excludes stepfamilies which cross households. For example, in the case of a child living mostly with their mother where their father lives with a new partner, this would be counted as a lone parent family (for the child and the mother) and a cohabiting couple (for the father and new partner) but neither would count as a stepfamily. Of those families recorded as stepfamilies most were stepfather families since eighty-five percent included children from the woman's previous relationship, eleven percent included children from the man's previous relationship and four percent from both partners' previous relationships (Office of National

Statistics, 2014). Additionally, whilst no data are available on the number of stepfamilies forming with adult stepchildren this may be increasing as there has been an increase in the number of couples over the age of fifty who are divorcing even as the overall divorce rate has fallen in recent years (Office of National Statistics, 2015). As many of these individuals will remarry or cohabit with a new partner, more adult stepfamilies are likely to form. It may be important to recognise and learn more about these families since some clinicians have found that adult stepchildren are a growing client group (e.g. Corrie, 2002). Whilst stepfamilies have always existed, around eighty-five percent are now formed after relationship breakdown rather than the death of a parent (Pryor, 2004). Indeed, all marriages end but it is only since 1970's that more have ended in divorce than death (Nock, 1992). This means that many modern stepfamilies do not mimic a two-parent nuclear family as they might previously have done, and many must negotiate ways to co-parent with an ex-partner. Although there have always been different kinds of families, Brehm suggested back in 1992 that changes had been so rapid that there might be a discrepancy between people's expectations and the reality they faced. With continuing rapid change, as discussed earlier, this must surely continue to be the case. Indeed, the concept of family has been challenged, in particular, from feminist scholars since it is argued the concept no longer captures the realities of contemporary lives (Gabb & Silva, 2011). Despite this critical challenge it is still evident today that when many people (especially politicians) talk about 'the family' and being 'family-oriented', they are often referring to the biological, nuclear family: no divorce, no single parents, no same-

sex couples and no stepfamilies. These different arrangements may not even be seen as real families (Roper & Capdevila, 2010). Brehm (1992) has argued that a narrow definition of family may make it harder to develop a different understanding of family life that is more responsive to the quality of the relationships involved. There is some evidence of greater acceptance of varied family forms for adults, with both cohabitation and divorce seen as unexceptional according to the British Social Attitudes Survey (Duncan & Philips, 2008). However, the same survey found that although a majority of respondents felt that stepfamilies could (probably) bring up children as well as two biological parents, less than half disagreed with the idea of making divorce harder for parents of children under sixteen and only forty-two percent felt that single parenting was as good as parenting by two parents together (Duncan & Philips, 2008). As these authors conclude there still seems to be greater acceptance of diverse family forms for adults without children than for parents and perhaps some tensions are inherent in these views. This is in accord with the earlier work of Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy (1999) who in both legal and everyday discourses of stepparents found themes of children needing both biological parents and social families. As the authors note these two needs are self-reinforcing within biological nuclear families but in considerable tension in stepfamilies. Although some authors suggest that as their prevalence increases stepfamilies are finding greater acceptance (e.g. Suanet, van der Pas & van Tilberg, 2013) other studies have found that non-nuclear families may not be given the same respect, may be viewed more negatively (Planitz & Feeney, 2009), may not be seen as secure and permanent (e.g.

Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000) and some may not be seen as 'real' families (Pryor, 2014) but how can they be if no-one (including those involved) expects them to be?

Relative to biologically related first-married families, stepfamilies are generally described as more stressful for their members and less cohesive (Banker & Gaertner, 1998) and second marriages are even more likely than first to end in divorce, especially if there are children involved (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000).

Although most children live with their mother after divorce, many have a stepmother in the home they visit when in contact with their father and the number of children living with their father and stepmother is increasing (King, 2007; Johnson, Wright, Craig, Gilchrist, Lane & Haigh, 2008). In fact, as men remarry significantly earlier and more frequently than women (McCarthy, 2007), children are more likely to have a stepmother than a stepfather if they remain in contact with their father after parental divorce or separation. Although some men do lose contact with their children, according to a recent fatherhood study eighty seven percent of fathers who don't live with their children say they still have contact with them (Poole, O'Brien, Speight, Connolly, & Aldrich, 2014). Despite this, stepmother families of any type have received limited research attention.

Orchard and Solberg (1999) reviewed studies conducted between 1987 and 1999 and found that only five percent focused on the stepparent role or behaviours, and that more information was available on stepfathers than stepmothers. Although there is a little more recent attention to stepmothers (e.g. Shapiro & Stewart, 2012; Doodson, 2014), it remains true that most of the research focus is on stepfathers or stepfather families. This may be partly because many stepmothers are non-

residential (since mothers are still more likely to have custody of their children) having their stepchildren living with them only part-time. Such families are rarely included in research and may be somewhat 'invisible'; not appearing officially (as noted earlier) and difficult to identify (Burgoyne & Clarke, 1984; Visser, Visser & Kay, 2002).

#### ***1.4 Research objectives***

Bearing in mind the trends and the definitional and diversity issues raised above together with research findings that suggest greater difficulties for stepmothers than stepfathers (Bernstein, 1989; Levin, 1997; Neilsen, 1999) (an issue that is discussed in more detail in relation to the literature in chapter two), there is a need for research taking a more inclusive approach to the exploration of stepmothering. This project is therefore concerned with developing a greater understanding of diverse stepmothering experiences and with considering the ways that identities may be negotiated and discursive resources drawn on by stepmothers to make sense of their experiences.

#### ***1.5. Structure of the thesis***

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. This first chapter has provided some background to the subject of stepmothering and sets out some of the reasons for conducting research into the topic. It has also offered some definitions and given a

brief introduction to key concepts including reflexivity, discourse, narrative and identity which will be more fully explicated in later chapters.

Chapter two provides an overview of the context of this research with a consideration of family and parenting and a review of the stepfamily literature. This demonstrates both the difficulties that previous research has identified for stepmothers and the limitations of such research for understanding the subjective experience of stepmothering.

In chapter three this thesis looks at methodology and method. The chapter starts with a consideration of the narrative-discursive approach taken in this study, including discussion of the way that methodological decisions have been informed by feminist approaches to research and by the ontological and epistemological positions taken. There is some contextualisation of the methodology and discussion of the key topic of identity and the way that this is conceptualised within this project. The second part of this chapter discusses the methods used in this research explaining how and why the particular data sources were chosen and how the data were gathered and analysed. It also considers the ethical issues that arose in respect of this study. In addition, chapter three includes some reflexive comments about how, as a researcher, I am situated within my research and how this has impacted on the work.

The three chapters that follow present the empirical work offering analysis with illustrative extracts from the data. Each of these chapters is organised around a 'meta-theme', that is, an overarching topic or area that was a major feature within the talk of the stepmothers participating in this research. Chapter four considers



talk about male partners, chapter five looks at the way that home is discussed and chapter six focusses on talk about the biological mother of the stepchildren. In each of these chapters the analysis explores the ways in which stepmothers undertake 'identity work' (Taylor & Littleton, 2006) and considers the discursive resources that are drawn upon in this endeavour.

Finally, chapter seven summarises the main contributions of this research including the application of the methodology to a new source of data and the claims made in the empirical chapters about the identity conflicts that stepmothers face in the context of current understandings of issues around family and parenting.

## **Chapter two**

### **A review of the context of this research and the stepfamily literature**

*“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.” (Jane Howard, 1978)*

#### **2.1. Introduction**

Chapter one has considered relevant trends, the diversity of stepfamilies, the broad focus of this work and some of the reasons this is an important topic for research. It has also served to outline the structure of this thesis. The present chapter considers some feminist theorising of family and parenting and reviews the stepfamily research identifying specific gaps in the existing literature. This leads to explication of the research questions addressed in this study.

#### **2.2. Family, gender, mothers and fathers**

##### **2.2.1. Family**

Whilst the present research is based in psychology, stepfamily research is interdisciplinary with much research emanating from sociology. As Burman (2008) argues, sociology offers a variety of approaches to theorising families, however, functionalist views such as those of Parsons and Murdock have been pervasive. Such functionalist approaches see ‘The Family’ as a universal basic social unit in which there is co-residence, cooperation between members and an exchange of goods such as money and food together with services such as childcare and sex

(Burman, 2008). As indicated in the introduction to this work, an assumption of co-residence can be problematic when considering stepfamilies that may inhabit more than one household. In addition, it can be argued that functionalist approaches legitimate traditional gender and age roles while ignoring conflict and power relations. Jones, Tepperman and Wilson (1995) emphasise the importance of this issue since imbalances in the relative size, strength and resources of individuals in the family are fundamental to patriarchal systems which have historically been dominant in the family. As Gabb and Silva (2011) point out, the functionalist approach and the concept of the family have been challenged by feminist sociologists (and others) since at least the 1990's. Such challenges recognise that a limited conception of family does not reflect the diversity of living arrangements and the reality of contemporary life.

In psychology the family is most often considered within a developmental approach. Burman (2008) has argued that with a focus on the child, the family is salient as representing those who live with and look after the child. Where developmental psychology extends beyond the child, family is usually considered in terms of its place within a normative life course. In this respect, as Woollett and Marshall (2004) contend, motherhood is seen as a defining aspect of a woman's adult identity. Phoenix and Woollett (1991) have argued that the discipline of psychology, because of its influence in approaches to child care and development, is implicated in social constructions of motherhood, which fit with political ideologies of the family. For example, in Britain in 1945, the family was seen as being under strain both materially and morally due to the effects of the Second

World War. Materially, couples had been separated, children evacuated, houses destroyed and many women were employed outside the home. Morally, illegitimate births, venereal disease and divorce had all increased suggesting (to some) that family life had been undermined (Fink, 2000). Bowlby's work on maternal deprivation (1951; 1952), with its implication that women should stay at home with their children, fitted well with this post war political climate and a situation where jobs were needed for men returning from the forces (see for example Dally, 1982).

Although the function of the family has often been seen as essentially part of the private sphere, responsible for socializing children and for the practical and emotional support of its members (Thorne, 1982; Allen, Lloyd & Few, 2009), it is also of critical political importance. When families do not adequately meet these responsibilities (for which women bear the major burden) by providing for their children or teaching them socially acceptable behaviours, the state may intervene (Miller, 2007; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). The role of state here is relevant because, as Bernades (1999) suggests, an acceptance of the existence and character of 'The Family' lends itself to contemporary right-wing political positions. From such positions variations to patriarchal family life, such as stepfamilies, will be understood as constituting deviance and regulated accordingly. Indeed, as Gillies (2006) has persuasively argued, cultural shifts in the conceptualisation of family have resulted in regular transgression of the boundary of family as the state makes 'an explicit and determined effort to mould and regulate individual subjectivity and citizenship at the level of the family' (p.2).

When British politicians today speak of a return to family values, or talk about 'hard-working families', it is implicit that the family they mean is a biological, nuclear family. However, as Dally (1982) points out, ideas of family are actually historically, culturally and socially situated. She notes that the historic basis of family was often economic, a unit of production rather than emotional support. As Burman (2008) convincingly argues, modern western notions of family are rooted in the contrast between public (work) and private (home) spheres, yet, as just discussed, this boundary may be permeable and both historically and culturally these realms may not always be separated. For instance, in some tribal or pre-industrial societies political influence may be gained by adding children to the home and encouraging neighbours to join a household as kin (Collier, Rosaldo & Yanagisako, 1982). Other examples of cultural differences in conception of family include African-American families who, according to Berk (2003), often have greater involvement with extended family than white Americans and Somali children who may refer to any involved man as 'my father' (Kaslow, 2001). Indeed, Pryor (2014) suggests that in some African cultures, social (rather than biological) parenting is widespread with the concept of a nuclear family being less usual, as is the idea of stepfamilies. A number of authors have pointed out that, both historically and geographically, patterns of mortality and fertility, together with economic factors impact the structure and composition of families (e.g. Burman, 2008). Thus, just as indicated in the quote used to introduce this chapter, families are, and always have been, varied, meaning that the nuclear, biological family is neither as traditional nor as universal as it may appear. Yet modern discourses of

family and particular political positions (as discussed earlier), which take this as the ideal form, manifest intolerance towards variety (such as lone parents or stepfamilies) and an insistence on uniformity (Roiphe, 1996; Bernades, 1999). For example, Wallbank (2001) points out that when lone mothers are constructed in popular discourses they are portrayed as failing and are often vilified by the press. Young mothers have been similarly pathologised (MacCleod, 2001; McRobbie 2007; Phoenix, 1991). In social, legal and political debates they may be constructed as unable to raise their children adequately, yet it is mothers who are usually expected to care for the children when a relationship ends. In this way they are simultaneously vilified and revered.

## *2.22. Gender and parenting*

The vilification of stepmothers in fairy tales and folklore discussed in chapter one is in sharp contrast to the idealization of motherhood. As Forna (1999) says, such idealization portrays the mother as innately nurturing, all-loving and all-giving, completely devoted to her child, thus the mother alone is the best caretaker for her children. In addition, as Miller (2007) notes this construction implies that the good mother will instinctively be able to care for her child. As a number of authors have argued, mothers have always existed but motherhood, in this idealized sense, is not natural but is a construction that presents itself as the natural outcome of biology and an innate female maternal instinct, disguising its social, historical and cultural location (e.g. Smart, 1996; Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001). Many authors have argued that the modern view of both childhood and motherhood has roots in

the Enlightenment and the work of Jean-Jaques Rousseau, and has continued to be refined and institutionalised from Victorian times onward (e.g. Burman, 2008). Contemporary motherhood is also grounded in a contemporary view of childhood, and this has only become possible as parents have gained confidence in the survival of their children. Until relatively modern times a large proportion of infants died; two hundred years ago around twenty-five percent of babies died within their first year and the death rate between the ages of one and five was a further eighteen percent (Dally, 1982). In this environment, there was little incentive for strong individual feelings for a child or for significant investment of time or love (Dally, 1982). Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century motherhood had no legal status; only fathers existed in law. The changing ideology of motherhood was integral to the political struggle by early feminists to create a legal institution of motherhood (Smart, 1996). In the twentieth century, psychology was prominent in the development of the modern ideal of a constantly attentive mother (Forna, 1999) and continues to be instrumental in constructing the ways in which motherhood is seen (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991; Burman, 2008). Both Bowlby and Freud emphasise the unique importance of the mother-child relationship, with gender roles seen as innate rather than socially constructed (Forna, 1999). As Hays (1996, 156) points out, such an assumption of women's 'natural' caring abilities does not take account of the 'circumstances, power relations and interests that have made women primarily responsible for mothering'. Thus ideas of parenting are highly gendered: by parent, we often mean mother, and mothers are held responsible for the way their children turn

out; maternal love is seen as natural, and mothering is the route to emotional fulfilment for women (Marshall, 1991). Miller (2005) points out the 'often taken for granted association between children's needs and maternal responsibilities emanating from essentialist ideas about women's natural capacity to nurture and care for others' and she notes that this provides a difficult context in which to make sense of early mothering experience. It may also provide a difficult context for stepmothers.

In addition to essentialist ideas about mothering there are increasing demands on parents to ensure the best outcomes for their children. Intensive parenting is a term originally coined by Hays (1996) as 'intensive mothering' to describe a very demanding, child-centred approach that requires not only considerable time and energy but also the acquisition of expert knowledge (Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012) much of which is, of course, acquired from the Psy disciplines. Additionally, intensive parenting may still, often, be highly gendered and used to mean intensive mothering. This intensity of parenting fits well with a policy direction in the UK since 1997 which places emphasis on parental responsibility. Initially with the New Labour government there was a movement from a welfare state towards a social investment state (Featherstone, 2010), with a focus on services for young children. Such investment was expected to make economic sense in that it would reduce future costs to society such as the cost of criminality and unemployment. New governments have resulted in changes of approach and in particular austerity has brought about cuts in many such child focussed services. However, even with government investment parents were still seen as responsible for improving



outcomes for their children and emphasis on parental responsibility has therefore increased (Featherstone, 2010). In the UK there is also a political rhetoric of 'hard working families' which expects parents to both nurture and provide financially for their children without relying on state benefits leaving many struggling with such dual demands (Yarwood & Locke, 2015). This may marginalise many mothers with its implication of caregiving versus wage-earning choice (Yarwood & Locke, 2015). Such rhetoric may also be especially difficult for some parents since it reflects a classed discourse espousing middle-class values and therefore positioning working-class parents as failing (e.g. Gillies, 2006; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). These positionings are inherent in recent political initiatives such as the Troubled Families Programme which was instituted by the coalition government in response to the 2011 summer riots in the UK. The programme was intended to support 'troubled families' in an effort to reduce anti-social behaviour. As several authors have pointed out, the implication with such interventions is that 'bad' parents (and often absent fathers) are responsible for these problems and such parents may be described in unflattering terms as an underclass (e.g. Bridges, 2012; Tyler, 2013). More recently the Troubled Families Programme has been demonstrated to have been ineffective (National Institute for Economic and Social Research, 2016). This is unsurprising to critics such as Callaghan (2016) who recognise that individualising blame fails to take account of the underlying causes of the problems such as poverty and inequality. There is then an environment currently in the UK in which a neoliberal agenda emphasises the individual responsibility of parents and in which

any family that is 'other' than the normative heterosexual, white, middle class, able-bodied, nuclear and two-parent may be demonised.

Although essentialist ideas about mothering may still be prevalent, alongside this, and in line with the increasing demands on parents just discussed, are changes in understandings of contemporary masculinity and fatherhood. These acknowledge fathering as a caring relationship rather than simply prioritising economic provision (e.g. Dermott, 2008; Henwood & Proctor, 2003; Marzano, Capdevila, Ciclitira, & Lazard, 2009) and require men to become 'involved fathers' (Wall & Arnold, 2007). This is also reflected in the prediction by Hunt (2009) that fathers will spend increased amounts of time with their children and yet, as discussed in chapter one, the same report also predicts that more fathers will live apart from their children. These changes are potentially in conflict, and additionally, there are particular demands placed on fathers who do not live with their children full-time and particular discourses are invoked in relation to them, often by politicians. For example the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron made a speech in 2011 which includes the injunction to fathers to support their children 'financially and emotionally', a clear reflection of the demands of the 'new father'. That is, they must incorporate traditional manly values (including financial support) together with caring and emotional sensitivity (Marzano, et. al., 2009) as well as being active and involved in everyday family life (Gill, 2003; Wall & Arnold, 2007). However, for many of the men whose partners are the subject of the data under consideration in the present study, access to their children is often part-time and they may face conflicting demands, financial, practical and emotional from a previous partner (the

biological mother of their children) and their current wife or partner. They may also face poverty since non-resident parents will not be prioritised for social housing and cannot claim any child related benefits (Lewis, Papacosta, & Warin, 2002). These issues of gender, family and parenting thus provide both the historical background and current context for stepfamily life and it is to a consideration of the stepfamily literature that I now turn.

### **2.3. Stepfamily Literature**

#### *2.31. Introduction*

Much research on stepfamilies has taken a deficit comparison approach with research questions formulated from the perspective that the nuclear biological family is the standard against which other forms are compared and alternatives often seen as deviant or substandard (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). As discussed earlier in this chapter this echoes a hegemonic discourse of family that can be drawn on to invoke particular political positions and which may thus be implicated in policy decisions as well as research approaches.

As the current study considers stepmothers in the UK, it is worth noting that the majority of previous research is North American, there is some European research (particularly from Scandinavia), some Australian work and a few British studies notably an early study by Burgoyne and Clark in 1984. There are many broad similarities across the developed world, such as a general trend of increasing divorce and remarriage together with an increase in cohabitation. However, there

are also differences, including differences in culture and in government policy and legislation relating to families. For example the Children Act 1989 in the UK allows an adult (other than the biological parents) who has 'actual care' of a child to apply to the courts for a residence order giving parental authority. This can include a stepparent, although they are not specifically mentioned in the legislation, and potentially extends the number of adults with legal responsibility for a child. However, a central principle of the Children's Act 1989 which is affirmed in the Family Law Act 1996 is the ongoing responsibility of biological parents (Edwards et. al. 1999). Residence orders are not generally possible in the US and, stepparents' rights, roles and responsibilities are not consistently recognised under US law (Malia, 2005). Additionally, as Featherstone (2010) points out, whilst there were some similarities between policy (in relation to family and children) between the UK and the US during the New Labour and Clinton years, these do not have parallels in other places such as in continental Europe or the Nordic countries. Stepparenting thus takes place in many different cultural and legal contexts and research findings from one context may not reflect the situation in another.

### *2.32. What's in a name?*

Throughout this work I am using the prefix 'step', as in stepfamily, stepmother, stepchild as these are the most frequently used form both within the literature and in common parlance. However, these names are not without problems. The term 'step' originates from the Old English word, 'steop', meaning 'bereaved' (Robinson & Smith, 1983). This, therefore, reflects the historic reason for the formation of a

stepfamily; re-marriage following a death, although, as discussed in chapter one, this is not the case for most modern stepfamilies. In addition, we can consider the word stepmother, based on the derivation it effectively means mother-loss (Smith, 1990) and as I argued in chapter one, it immediately invites the adjective 'wicked' and has negative connotations in many languages (Smith, 1990). The word 'stepchild' can also be used to symbolise inferiority and neglect quite outside the family context, for example 'the graphics division is the stepchild of the company' to indicate that the graphics division is not receiving investment and support or is not thriving (Jones, 2003). In their British study looking at stepfamilies and older people, Bornat, Dimmock, Jones and Peace (1999) found that some of their participants avoided the step prefix and others were explicit in their dislike of the term finding it upsetting. Thus the language of stepfamily relationships was neither fully accepted nor entirely comfortable for individuals. Although some research has found that, as an increasingly common family form, stepfamilies are finding greater acceptance (e.g. Suanet, van der Pas & van Tilberg, 2013) other work has found that they may still sometimes be perceived more negatively than biological families. This may be the case both for individuals brought up in stepfamilies and by those brought up in biological families (e.g. Ganong, Coleman and Mapes, 1990; Planitz & Feeney, 2009). Negative perceptions may be one reason that some families do not self-identify as stepfamilies as Hadfield and Nixon (2013) found in their research based on the first national cohort study of children in Ireland.

In an attempt to address the negative associations of the 'step' prefix, some clinicians and researchers have used different words for stepfamilies such as

'blended' (e.g. Braithwaite, Baxter & Harper, 1998; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup & Turman, 2001; Portrie & Hill, 2005) or 'reconstituted' (e.g. Berk, 2003). These may be used as an alternative or to suggest a movement from 'step' to 'blended' as the family becomes integrated (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Unfortunately, such euphemisms may do little to counteract negative associations or challenge stereotypes since they still provide a label that indicates a family structure that is other than biological and nuclear. Additionally these terms have been criticised for implying a process towards an integration which, when complete, renders a stepfamily smoothly homogenous and, as Martin (2009), in her popular book *Stepmonster*, notes, stepfamilies may never be (or aspire to be) fully blended, and this failure to acknowledge difference is unhelpful since it denies the reality for many stepfamilies.

Names can also be a concern within stepfamilies when ways of naming and addressing individuals in new relationships become necessary. Some researchers have argued that appropriate names for many of these relationships do not exist (Smith, 1990; Ganong & Coleman 2004). For example how is a stepmother to refer to her stepchildren's mother who is also her partner's ex? One term suggested by Anne Bernstein (1999), is 'ex-wife-in-law'. Recognising that anthropologists and sociolinguists suggest that the use and choice of personal address terms can reveal much about relationships, Koenig Kellas, LeClair-Underberg and Normand (2008) looked at such terms as they are used by stepchildren. They found three broad types of term which they referred to as: 'Formal' (e.g. my dad's wife), 'Familiar' (e.g. I call her Anna) and 'Familial' (e.g. Mum) which, they suggested, indicated

different degrees of emotional closeness. The authors found that the same child might use different types of term for different stepfamily members (e.g. familiar for the stepparent and familial for a stepsibling). Children also commonly switched terms when talking to those outside the family in order to avoid confusion or a lengthy explanation. Koenig Kellas et. al. (2008) also found that terms were used to manage identity, communicate solidarity or separateness and to manage complexity. Although some children explicitly acknowledged the importance that such terms had for them, other children minimised the significance of address terms when asked specifically about this. However, the authors found that the latter group made their importance clear in other responses during interviews. Overall then research has found that names can be problematic for stepfamilies insofar as they contribute to labelling and stereotyping. However, names can also be useful in understanding relationships within the family.

### *2.33. Impact on the children of marital breakdown and stepfamily life*

Names then can affect both adults and children in stepfamilies but it is children who are the subject of much stepfamily research. In a review of research on remarriage and stepfamilies during the 1990's, Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000) found that over a third focussed on the impact of marital breakdown and remarriage on child development. As a meta-analysis by Amato and Keith (1991) found the prevailing perspective was that marital breakdown (and remarriage) leads to a higher likelihood of problems for children and adolescents. Such problems include lower academic achievement (e.g. Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994;

McLanahan & Sandefor, 1994; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997; Pong & Ju, 2000), behavioural problems such as smoking and drug and alcohol use (Neher & Short, 1998) or teenage pregnancy (McLanahan & Sandefor, 1994) and poorer physical and mental health (Zill, Morrison & Coiro, 1993). Some more recent work has considered children who have been subject to multiple parental marital transitions generally suggesting that this has a cumulative negative affect ( e.g. Amato, 2010; Osborn & McLanahan, 2007; Sun & Li 2011). Such work is not, however, entirely in agreement since there are differing views about the factors influencing these negative outcomes with emphasis variously placed on parental conflict prior to divorce (e.g. Amato, Loomis & Booth, 1995), socio economic factors (Case & McLanahan, 1999) and parental competencies or parenting styles (Hetherington, 1999; Kelly & Lamb, 2000).

Particularly relevant for the current study is research that has considered the impact on children of living with a stepmother. Biblarz and Raftery (1999) used US national survey data to examine children's educational and occupational attainment. These authors found that, after accounting for socioeconomic status, attainments were reduced for children brought up by single fathers, fathers and stepmothers or mothers and stepfathers in comparison with children brought up by both biological parents or by a single biological mother. Case and McLanahan (1999) and Case, Lin and McLanahan (2000) found lower household spending on food, after controlling for household income, size, age composition and parental education, when children live with a non-biological mother but not when they live with a non-biological father. Case, et. al. suggest that this may indicate lower



investment in a non-birth child although they could not say whether lower household spending translated into lower food consumption for all household members or just for the non-birth child. However, this research included step, adoptive and foster families so results were not specifically attributable to stepmother families. In addition Case and Paxson (2001) used data from a US National Health Interview survey to examine health investments made by women in their step, foster and adopted children. Here the authors found that children living with stepmothers were significantly less likely than children living with birth mothers to receive routine medical and dental care unless they also had regular contact with their biological mothers. For children who had such contact medical care did not differ from that experienced by children living with their birth mother. These three studies indicating negative impacts for children living with stepmothers all understand their findings as supportive of sociobiological theory in which adults make lower investments in non-biological children (Daly & Wilson, 1985). In contrast, a large scale American study by Ziol-Guest and Dunifon, (2014) looked at health outcomes for children in a variety of living arrangements and found that living with a biological father was an important predictor of children's health. These authors found that children living with a stepfather, with grandparents or in foster care fared worse than those living with both biological parents but this was not true for children living with a single mother or with a stepmother.

Overall then, previous research in this area suggests considerable complexity. Many studies have reported more negative outcomes for children whose parents have divorced than for those in intact biological families. However, in a meta-

analysis Amato and Keith (1991) found that the actual differences were usually small, with considerable diversity and overlap. As Amato (2000) and Hetherington (2003) found in reviewing literature in this area, some studies may conflate the impact of experiences within the marriage that later ends in divorce with the divorce itself and with membership of a stepfamily thus potentially adding to unwarranted negative conceptions of stepfamily life. Although some research in this area has controlled for socio-economic status, I would argue that the effects of poverty are difficult to isolate since, as a number of authors contend, poverty can be both a contributory cause (e.g. Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Conger, Simons & Whitbeck, 1990) and a consequence of relationship breakdown (e.g. Evans, Harkness & Ortiz, 2004). This is important because poverty has been shown to affect outcomes for children on many measures such as health, education and future employment (e.g. see Griggs & Walker, 2008 for a review). In addition, a focus on the negative impacts of divorce, rather than on factors that may aid resiliency, is unlikely to be helpful to families in the process of separation or forming stepfamilies particularly where such research tends to support negative stereotypes of stepparents as discussed earlier. In particular, suggestions that children's behaviour may be adversely affected are crucial in an environment where, as I have already argued in this chapter, parents are held responsible for their children's behaviour and may become subject to state intervention or censure where this is seen as problematic.

#### *2.34. Systems and styles, roles and boundaries*

As mentioned earlier, effective parenting styles are cited by some researchers as important factors influencing outcomes for children in stepfamilies. Unsurprisingly therefore, a number of studies focus on stepparenting styles or stepfamily structure and processes. Several authors have developed typologies of stepfamily structure or stepparenting styles. For example Burgoyne and Clark (1984), in an early British study in which they interviewed thirty-two (mainly stepfather) couples, found five stepfamily types of which two attempted to mimic a biological nuclear family and one was frustrated by being unable to do so. Other studies have also found that the nuclear family as a 'norm' is pervasive (e.g. Berger, 1995). Of these typologies only Church (1999) studied stepmothers with her 'kinship models' based on interviews with 104 Canadian stepmothers. Most of these were white and middle-class and seventy-one percent were residential stepmothers. Church identified five kinship models that related to the way her participants conceptualized their roles and family relationships. These kinship models are summarised on the following page (*Table 1.*).

*Table 1. Stepmother kinship models, Church (1999)*

<b>Kinship model</b>	<b>Description</b>
Nuclear	Based on looking like a nuclear family, attempts to limit relationships outside the household. The stepchildren's mother is seen as disruptive and often considered a poor parent. Stepmothers are sometimes distressed that they function as a mother but do not get the recognition. Usually full-time residential stepmothers.
Extended	Include their stepchildren as kin but consider family more broadly and see a benefit for themselves of an expanded kin network. The stepmother defines a role for herself that is an addition rather than a replacement for the biological parents.
Couple	The primary focus is the relationship with the partner into which the ex-wife may be seen as intrusive. The relationship with the stepchildren is non-parental, but may be friendly, ambivalent, or distant. Stepchildren are not seen as kin. Conflict arises when their partner puts the children before the stepmother.
Biological	All have biological children and define their family biologically, excluding the stepchildren and sometimes their partner from their definition of family and sometimes feeling excluded from their partner's relationship with his children.
No Family	The stepmother feels alone, unrelated to anyone in the stepfamily. Relationships with their stepchildren are problematic and they regard their partners as unsupportive. May be a position of retreat when initial attempts to create a place in the family are thwarted.

These models are useful in showing that not all stepfamilies are the same and some indicate that different styles may be both functional and satisfying. Church (1999) concluded that there are several ways to be a stepfamily and that there is a danger in failing to acknowledge this diversity. However, her model highlights the potential for distress for the stepmother in many of the kinship models she identified. In a

British study, Doodson and Morley (2006) interviewed eight non-residential stepmothers and their findings offer support for Church's (1999) model. However, Doodson and Morley have a rather prescriptive interpretation of their findings with a suggestion that it is 'advantageous if the stepmother can view 'her family' as one which encompasses both her natural and her stepchildren'.

Typologies do indicate diversity but they offer a 'snapshot' presenting a rather static picture. Other research has looked specifically at stepfamily development as a process. For example, Papernow (1993) proposed a staged pattern and suggested that an evolved stepparent role does not compete with the biological parent of the same gender and includes an intergenerational boundary between the stepparent and child. This point about the importance of an intergenerational boundary is particularly relevant to stepmothers since women in second marriages are more likely than those in first marriages to be significantly younger than their husbands (Crohn, 2006) so that intergenerational boundaries are unclear. Jacobson (1995) also takes a processual view suggesting that individuals must integrate 'micro-cultures' brought from previous relationships into a common set of customs or nomos. Cherlin (1978) has suggested that stepfamilies are incomplete institutions and as Braithwaite, Baxter and Harper (1998) found, at the start it is important that they develop new adaptive rituals which enable adjustment to the loss of the old family whilst embracing the new. In this process Jacobson (1995) notes that ex-spouses are often cast in a negative light in order to strengthen solidarity in the new marriage and maintain a positive view of self and of marriage. A number of studies highlight the importance of good communication for successful

relationships within stepfamilies. For example Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup and Turman (2001) identified five developmental routes to stepfamily formation and found satisfaction for families in all five trajectories when there was open communication but that a lack of communication could result in physical and emotional disengagement from the family. These processual approaches all highlight the importance of evolving relationships and roles although they offer no specific information about stepmothering.

Orchard and Solberg (1999) and Weaver and Coleman (2005) undertook research exploring the roles of stepmothers. Both studies found considerable flexibility with stepmothers occupying a variety of roles that were not mutually exclusive and with expectations and roles changing over time and in response to situational demands. In Orchard and Solberg's (1999) research many of the women felt that their husbands had different expectations of them as stepmothers than they themselves had, with husbands usually wanting them to be more involved or mother-like. Few felt that their husbands were supportive or appreciative of their role as stepmothers. Thus many felt undervalued making the role difficult and stressful. Weaver and Coleman (2005) used a grounded theory approach and also found that role adoption was not exclusive and evolved over time. Their participants were eleven white middle-class non-residential stepmothers and they identified three general roles; mothering but not mother roles (provider of care, emotional support, guidance and friendship), other-focussed roles (liaison with ex-wife, facilitator), and outsider roles (not directly involved with stepchildren). In common with Orchard and Solberg (1999), Weaver and Coleman (2005) found

considerable role ambiguity for non-residential stepmothers and noted that they often had ambivalent feelings towards their stepchildren.

Fine (1995) suggests that such role ambiguity may be greater in 'complex' stepfamilies (where both spouses bring children from a previous marriage) than in 'simple' stepfamilies (where only one spouse brings children from a previous marriage) as each partner is both a stepparent and a biological parent. This is given some support by the more recent work of Doodson and Davies (2014). These authors considered both biological mothers and different types of stepmother comparing levels of anxiety and depression. Using a self-report questionnaire, they found that mean levels of depression and anxiety across all types of stepmothers were (non-significantly) higher than those for biological mothers but also that full time stepmothers in complex stepfamilies reported especially high levels of depression whereas part-time stepmothers in simple stepfamilies (i.e. without biological children) reported a significantly higher mean level of anxiety than did biological mothers. This latter finding is in accord with Fine's (1995) argument that the role of the stepmother may be more ambiguous than that of the stepfather because stepmothers are less likely to live full-time with their stepchildren<sup>1</sup> and may therefore have fewer socially accepted role prescriptions. Limited contact also restricts their opportunities to develop clear roles. In addition, the stepparent role may be more ambiguous when the non-residential parent is very involved with the child since this leaves little need for the stepparent to assume an active parenting

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers are difficult to estimate due to the definitional issues discussed in chapter one, but, according to Ganong, Coleman and Mapes (1990), around eighteen percent of stepfamilies are full time stepmother families.

role. Such involvement is more likely when the non-residential parent is the mother (Visser & Visser, 1988). As Waterman (2003) found, this continued involvement of a biological mother is a key difference between stepmothers and other non-biological mothers together with stepmothers' lack of a defined legal status or choice of their stepchildren.

Ambert (1986) compared residential and non-residential stepmothers finding that non-residential stepmothers reported more conflict with their husbands and felt less appreciated by them. In contrast the residential stepmothers in Ambert's study reported closer relationships with stepchildren and felt that they had more control and experienced greater marital happiness.

Control also arose as a concern of stepmothers in an Australia study of non-residential stepmothers (Henry & McCue, 2009). The authors identified two main themes of perceived control and wellbeing (physical and psychological). Perceived lack of control over parenting practices and financial matters was seen to manifest in anger, resentment and depression. This also reflects a finding in my own previous work with stepmothers (Roper & Capdevila, 2010) where using Q methodology facilitated the identification of nine different perspectives on the experience of being a stepmother. One of these was entitled *Out of my control* to reflect the frustration expressed by stepmothers at their lack of control over aspects of the situation.

Despite such evidence of differences between residential and non-residential stepmothers, the findings of Johnson et al (2008) indicate that this dichotomy may



be too simplistic. Their study incorporated a factor representing the degree of residency based on the amount of time spent by the stepchild in the household. Their results indicate similarities in levels of stress and marital satisfaction between fully residential, evenly residential (fifty percent), mostly residential and fully non-residential stepmothers. Mostly non-residential stepmothers were found to differ from the other four types and had less clarity of role. Like Fine (1995) and Doodson and Davies (2014) these authors also note differences between stepmothers with and without biological children. Those with biological children reported smaller social support networks and more responsibility for household chores and stepchild care. This study, together with those discussed previously thus offers some confirmation of the complex interaction of these different aspects of stepfamily structure and therefore of the importance of recognising diversity in stepfamily types.

In addition to a lack of role clarity, stepfamilies may be characterised by ambiguous boundaries. This is unlike the situation in biological families where membership is defined sanguinely, legally and spatially (Pasley, Roden, Visser & Visser, 1996). In stepfamilies relationships are not all based on a blood tie. Legal rights and responsibilities may be unclear or non-existent, children are often members of more than one household and parenting may take place across households. Pasley et. al. (1996) suggest that boundary ambiguity can lead to dissonance and result in loyalty conflict and guilt. Brown and Manning (2009) found that boundary ambiguity, measured by level of discrepancy about family membership and structure between mothers and adolescents, increased as family complexity

increased and was greatest in cohabiting (as opposed to married) stepfamilies. Just as Cherlin (1978) proposed that stepfamilies are an incomplete institution, lacking social norms, these researchers therefore suggest that cohabitation is itself an incomplete institution. Thus a cohabiting stepfamily suffers ambiguity in two ways. Boundary ambiguity is also apparent as an issue for researchers where a stepfamily is often equated with a household (as discussed earlier) and where discrepant views about family structure may confound inclusion or measurement in research.

A number of studies then have found that role strain and ambiguity can lead to psychological distress for stepfamily members with the stepmother role perhaps the most ambiguous. Much of the early psychological work on stepfamilies came from clinicians who were concerned by such difficulties and clinical reports have suggested that stepmothers often suffer greater stress than stepfathers (e.g. Bernstein, 1989; Fine, 1995; Nielsen, 1999; Smith, 1990). Also, women, but not men, suffer more mental health problems if they are a stepparent or the partner of a stepparent (Feijten, Boyle, Graham, & Gayle, 2011). There is also evidence of a greater likelihood of depression for stepmothers than stepfathers or biological mothers. For example Morrison and Thompson-Guppy (1985) found that, in an attempt to find acceptance in their new family, many stepmothers were overcompensating for the negative way in which stepmothers may be perceived, resulting in psychological distress. Morrison and Thompson-Guppy conceptualized this as 'Cinderella's stepmother syndrome'. In the self-report study mentioned earlier, Doodson and Davies (2014) found that stepmothers reported higher mean levels of depression and anxiety than biological mothers, with some reporting

depressive symptoms at higher than clinical levels. In a further study Doodson (2014) used focus groups to undertake a qualitative exploration of the factors underlying stepmother anxiety. This work found that stepmother anxiety is predominantly related to three areas: their relationship with the biological mother of their stepchildren, their relationship with their stepchildren, and lack of clarity regarding the stepmother role.

Similarly, in a study with one hundred and twenty-five stepparents (eighty-four female) Shapiro and Stewart (2012) found that relationships with stepchildren and with the stepchild's other biological parent were linked to depressive symptoms. However, rather than role clarity, their findings suggest that support and validation from the partner was most associated with reduced depressive symptoms, particularly in the early years of stepfamily formation. Given the suggestions from other work (e.g. Orchard and Solberg, 1999), that role clarity may be impacted by a partner's differing expectations of the stepmother role these findings may be in accord with research stressing the importance of role clarity (e.g. Doodson, 2014).

More than twenty-five years ago, Smith (1990) concluded that the professional literature focussed too much on the problems of stepfamily life, neglecting the strengths. Psychology professionals are most likely to see stepfamilies when they are experiencing problems and this may have contributed to the deficit-comparison approach often used, particularly in early psychological research. As mentioned earlier in this approach, stepfamilies may be compared with nuclear families and often found deficient. However, such an approach was not universally adopted; the clinicians John and Emily Visser were early researchers in the field and introduced a

normative-adaptive paradigm (Visher & Visher, 1979). Rather than make comparisons with other family forms, this approach focuses more on what makes some stepfamilies more successful than others. More recently Michaels (2006) also looked at factors that contribute to stepfamily success. However, even these attempts to focus on successful stepfamilies rarely challenge an underlying assumption that stepparents should have a parental relationship with their stepchildren, just as in a biological nuclear family. So as Gamache (1997) has argued, step-relationships are most often constructed in line with dominant cultural norms of the nuclear family.

#### *2.35. Relationships with stepchildren*

The pervasiveness of the wicked stepmother myth was discussed in chapter one and, as Bruner (1960) argues, myths rely for their continuation on internalisation of personal identities based on the externalised ideas generated by the myth. Thus, as Claxton-Oldfield (2000) confirms, this myth influences perceptions and expectations of everyone in a society including the way that stepmothers view themselves and the way that children view stepmothers. The myth may therefore be influential in the relationships between stepmothers and their stepchildren and it has certainly had some influence on research. Within a limited literature on stepmothering, the wicked stepmother myth or Cinderella are often referred to in the titles of papers (e.g. Campbell, 1995; Christian, 2005; Salwen, 1990; Whiting, Smith, Barnett & Gafsky, 2007). Four studies; Dainton (1993), Campbell (1995), Salwen (1990) and Ceglie and Gardner (2000), focussed on a discussion of the

myth emphasising its prominence in popular discourse. Dainton (1993) examined identity management strategies used by stepmothers. Both Dainton (1993) and Campbell (1995) suggested that stress results from the contradiction inherent in the wicked stepmother myth and the myth of instant love based on cultural standards of mothering creating an expectation that a stepmother will instantly love her stepchildren (Visser & Visser, 1988; Wald, 1981). In her theoretical paper Dainton (1993) proposed two public strategies that might be used by stepmothers; *concealment* (e.g. posing as a biological mother) and *confrontation and breaking through* (i.e. attempting to frame the identity in a constructive and commendable context) and suggests that identity is an important theoretical concept in considering the experiences of stepmothers.

Salwen (1990) discussed the wicked stepmother myth in some detail but was also concerned with the way that this is embedded in roles differentiated by gender where women take on the majority of caretaking and nurturing of children. She suggested that one solution (at least for heterosexual stepmothers) is to remove oneself from this role, leaving the father (the biological parent) dealing with decisions and arrangements for his children's care.

Ceglian and Gardner (2000) were interested in why some stepmothers become hostile to their stepchildren (designating the route to this as the wicked stepmother spiral) and related this to attachment theory since attachment style (theorised by Bowlby to develop in childhood) is believed to affect adult relationships and parent-child relationships. They found that stepmothers with secure and anxious attachment styles were more likely to feel inadequate in their

relationships with their stepchildren, while those with an avoidant style were more likely to perceive that they treat their stepchildren unfairly. Whilst interesting, this approach locates any problem in these relationships with the stepmother herself. This fails to take account of issues that other researchers have suggested are key, such as role ambiguity or conflict and the degree of support from her partner.

The quality of relationships between stepparents and their stepchildren are important both to the wellbeing of the stepchildren (e.g. Coleman, Ganong & Russell, 2013; Sweeney, 2010), and to the mental health of the stepparent (e.g. Doodson, 2014; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011;2012). Studies suggest considerable diversity in stepparent–stepchild relationships with adults seeing their roles varying from close and parent-like to distant (e.g Church, 1999; Erera-Weatherly; 1996; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Children also see relationships with stepparents in a similar variety of ways (e.g. Fine, 1995) sometimes expressed in different ways of naming stepparents as discussed earlier in this chapter (e.g. Koenig Kellas, LeClair-Underberg & Normand, 2008). Coleman, Ganong, Russell and Frye-Cox (2015) contended that research has generally found that greater investment, of both time and material goods, by stepparents in their stepchildren's lives results in closer relationships. These researchers also found that where relationships between stepparents and stepchildren were close, and where the child had considered the adult to be family, relationships were more likely to be maintained if the adult couple separated. This did, however, also rely on the biological parent supporting a continued relationship. As discussed previously, second marriages are even more likely than first marriages to end in divorce, especially if there are children involved,

(Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000) so many people will find themselves with ex-step-relations. Yet, this is an area that appears to have received very little research attention to date.

Where stepparents are involved with their stepchildren from infancy they are more likely to be viewed as additional parents (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011).

However, this cannot apply to the many people who become stepparents to older, even adult stepchildren and, as argued in chapter one, this is likely to become more common. It is therefore interesting that some fairly recent research has found that older stepparents are increasingly likely to include stepchildren in their personal networks (Suanet, van der Pas & van Tilburg, 2013). These authors suggest that this is due to more permeable family boundaries and, whilst it may not reflect parental type relationships, it does offer opportunities for mutual support.

A few studies have looked specifically at relationships between stepmothers and their stepchildren. Heather Gallardo (2007) used auto ethnography and drew on symbolic interactionism to examine her own relationship with her stepdaughter, considering how this is experienced and negotiated by the two of them and how stepmothering is an identity that is co-constructed through language and communication. Analysing her stepdaughter's discourse during a family conversation over dinner, Dedaic (2001) also considered the way in which a stepmother can be actively positioned in discourse with family members.

Some work has also explored stepmothers' relationships with adult stepchildren. Crohn's (2006) research, utilising a strengths perspective, is based on the

perceptions of nineteen young adult stepdaughters who self-identified as having positive relationships with their mothers and stepmothers. From her interviews she identifies five styles of stepmothering seen by these young women as positive. Crohn (2010) also found that more of the young adult women in her study were able to discuss sexuality with their stepmothers than with their mothers. Crohn suggests that this is a previously unrecognized characteristic of positive stepmother–stepdaughter functioning. This work is unusual in emphasising positivity and, although it doesn't give us the stepmothers' perspectives, I do want to draw attention to Crohn's findings about age differences in the remarried couples who participated in her study. Nine of the nineteen remarriages were 'May-December' relationships with the stepmother significantly younger than the father. This is clearly a common situation in stepmother families, one that was apparent in my own previous work (Roper, 2007) and on the web forum for stepmothers used to gather data for the current research, but it is rarely mentioned in the literature.

Hart's (2009) paper was based on her experiences over years of psychodynamically oriented clinical practice. Noting that the stepmother/daughter relationship is usually the most problematic, she explored this relationship in families where the biological mother continued to be an active parent. Based on her findings, Hart suggested that an 'internal parental stance' (i.e. feeling like a parent) underlies her concept of 'good enough' stepmothering although this does not necessitate an external parenting role. Whilst this seems to offer advice about how to be a successful stepmother, it is ineffective in situations where a parental feeling is not



possible. Such a feeling may not always be appropriate (for example when the stepmother is close in age to the stepchild) and may not be necessary for good relationships if we consider Crohn's (2006) findings mentioned above.

Vinick and Lanspery (2000) also dealt with stepmothers' relationships with adult stepchildren but in this case from the perspective of the stepmothers looking back on the relationship development over time (between ten and forty-one years).

Although some relationships were poor or had deteriorated, in many cases they had improved and the stepmothers felt that their own efforts had been

instrumental in this. They also often felt that they had been key in improving relationships between the father and his children. Thus, this study highlights the kin-keeping role and family change activities often undertaken by stepmothers.

This is in accord with other findings that women and girls are better at managing relationships (Schmeeckle, 2007). However, the presence of a stepmother may not always be positive for father-child relationships. According to a more recent study, re-partnered fathers have less frequent contact with their children than divorced fathers who live alone. They exchange less support with them, and have poorer quality relationships with their children (Kalmijn, 2013). Divorce and re-partnering may thus have cumulative negative effects. Kalmijn (2013) suggested that these findings might relate to the fathers having less need for support from their children when they have a new spouse, difficulties between the children and their stepmother, and fathers switching investments to a new family after divorce. This might also reflect findings that co-parenting relationships may deteriorate when separated parents re-partner and this may be a particular problem if the re-

partnering occurs soon after the earlier relationship breaks down when issues of finance and child care are still under negotiation (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). As men re-marry and re-partner more quickly after relationship breakdown (McCarthy, 2007), difficult co-parenting relationships are perhaps more likely for re-partnered men and their ex-wives or partners, that is, in stepmother families and this may sometimes detract from father-child relationships.

### *2.36. Stepmothers and support*

I have already discussed some research which has found that stepmothers may feel unsupported by their partners and that this may contribute to the stresses of the role (e.g. Church, 1999; Orchard & Solberg, 1999). Indeed as discussed earlier good support from a partner was found by Shapiro and Stewart (2012) to offer a protective effect against depression. In addition to the need for support from a partner, a number of studies have identified social support as important in helping stepmothers to cope with the stresses, including the lack of role clarity, that they often face (e.g. Ceglian & Gardner, 2000). Where partner support is lacking women may thus turn to other sources of social support. However, because there may be little understanding from women who are not stepmothers, they may look outside their usual networks and turn especially to other stepmothers for support (Craig, Harvey-Knowles & Johnson, 2012). Just a few studies have investigated stepmothers seeking such social support and it is the findings of these that I will now discuss.

Jones (2004) described how concepts drawn from narrative therapy were used in an ongoing therapeutic support group for stepmothers. She explained that the narrative perspective derives from a social constructionist view, accepts multiple realities and understands the narrative as a central means by which people construct, describe and understand their experiences. Stories may be shaped by context but have the power to bring about change and can thus be used therapeutically by individuals working with therapists or by support group members, to identify beliefs, values and meanings that are hindering growth and self-esteem. Collectively the group that Jones discussed developed a 'counter stepmother story', one that embraces caring and commitment in contrast to the themes of callousness embedded in the culturally dominant wicked stepmother story. This is very similar to Dainton's finding (1993) that stepmothers may attempt to frame their identity in a constructive and commendable context. Other recurrent stories found by Jones (2004) were 'Coping with 'hear no evil, see no evil'', that is, dealing with overt hostility from adolescent or young adult stepchildren often unacknowledged by spouses, 'Caring and caregiving without authority' where bonds with the stepchild are close but the stepparent role is inherently limited causing frustration. These stepmothers also constructed *The Ex-wife story* and as Jones explained this is often a person who still exercises considerable influence over family life and a relationship that is frequently tense and frustrating. In this study black humour and wicked stepmother stories were used to externalise, reframe and cope. One of the particular benefits that Jones

(2004) found that the support group offered was the opportunity for stepmothers to compare themselves with others.

Christian (2005) also looked at the use of narrative in a stepmother support group. In this case the group was online and Christian focused specifically on the way that narratives were used to address the wicked stepmother myth. In this group the stepmothers created a binary opposition to the usual construction, positioning the biological mother as wicked and the stepmother as good by showing the biological mother as incompetent or mentally unstable and the stepmother as a martyr. This has some similarity to the counter stepmother story developed in the face-to-face support group studied by Jones (2004).

A further study examined the use of an online support group. In this case Craig and Johnson (2011) looked at how an online group was used by childless stepmothers to alleviate the stress caused by role strain. They particularly wanted to compare stepmothers on the basis of the time spent with stepchildren, since, as mentioned earlier, other authors (e.g. Orchard & Solberg, 1999) have found greater strain for non-residential (part-time) stepmothers than for those who live with their stepchildren full-time. Craig and Johnson (2011) suggested that an online support group offers advantages with its ability to allow anonymity making it a low-risk and safe environment in which to discuss negative feelings that might be censured elsewhere. The ability to seek information was also identified as important and, just as Jones (2004) found, comparison with a variety of others in similar situations, was another key benefit of the online support group investigated. Craig and Johnson (2011) found that twenty-two percent of the data in their study related to

the relationship between the stepmother and the biological mother of the stepchildren. They considered this a relationship of major concern for stepmothers and one which involves significant strain and stress, making it a key area for further research.

One further study looks at stepmothers using an online support group (Craig, Harvey- Knowles & Johnson, 2012). The focus of this work is lack of support from the partner which the authors found was the issue that generated the most posted comments on the site with stepmothers sometimes feeling invalidated by their significant other. Another major topic identified by Craig et. al. was the benefit of the site in offering supportive communication for women struggling with difficulties at home. Although research into stepmother's use of social support is limited, overall studies do indicate that stepmothers may often feel unsupported by their partner and that support from other stepmothers may be particularly useful in helping to alleviate or manage the difficulties of the stepmothering role.

#### ***2.4. Chapter summary***

In this chapter I have argued that particular constructions of family are pervasive and have political importance with the potential to influence both media portrayals and policy decisions. This links to a neoliberal climate which, I have argued, places increasing demands on parents with expectations of fathers (including fathers who do not live their children's biological mother) changing rapidly. I have also discussed the influence of psychology on views of the family and on constructions

of mothers which idealise motherhood. The review of the stepfamily literature presented above has demonstrated that these constructions of family and motherhood are influential both within stepfamilies themselves and in the approaches taken to research in this area. However, although there are acknowledgements, by some researchers, of the potential impact of these discourses and of the narrative of the wicked stepmother, the majority of research to date has not explored the effects of this discursive climate on stepmothers. I have pointed out that much stepfamily research has concentrated on the negative impacts of divorce, re-marriage and stepfamily membership on children. Additionally, stepfather families are included in research more often than stepmother families. In summary, the stepfamily literature offers a limited exploration of stepmothering and very little description of the experience as it is being lived by women today. There are few British studies and in addition little of the research has embraced the diversity of stepfamilies with many types of 'non-traditional' stepfamilies usually excluded. Whilst there are a number of studies looking at roles this is rarely broadened to consider identity more fully. This is despite Dainton's assertion back in 1993 that identity is an important theoretical concept in considering the experiences of stepmothers. The stepfamily literature does, however, suggest gendered inequities in the experience of stepparenting with greater difficulties and suffering for women, making this a very relevant subject of study for feminist research.

### ***2.5. Research Questions***

Chapter one outlined the objectives of this research and these, together with an understanding of the gaps in knowledge identified above, inform the research questions which are:

- How do British stepmothers from varied backgrounds discursively negotiate their (troubled) identities?
- What discursive resources are drawn on in this identity work?

## **Chapter Three.**

### **Methodology and method**

*'People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around.'* (Terry Pratchett, 1992)

#### **3.1. Introduction**

This quotation from Terry Pratchett raises a question that is relevant to the understanding of language on which this research is based - the relationship between stories and people. The introductory chapter of this thesis and the research questions posed at the end of the previous chapter have already provided an indication of the methodological approach taken. In the present chapter I will discuss this approach in more detail, explaining how the methodology is suited to the research questions and how it fits with the theoretical and epistemological position taken. The synthetic narrative-discursive research approach used draws largely on the methodology developed by Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton (2006) although there are some points of departure that will be detailed in this chapter. Taylor and Littleton's (2006) approach itself draws on previous work in narrative analysis, discourse analysis and discursive psychology so the discussion here will attempt to situate this methodology in relation to its antecedents. Following this discussion of methodology the second part of this chapter provides details of how the data were collected and analysed. I will then offer some reflexive comments on this process.



### **3.2. Methodology**

In discussing methodology in social research, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue that methodological decisions must consider ethics and the production of knowledge along with the implications therein, such as accountability and power. Following this approach, I would argue, research questions should always be informed by epistemology, ontology, methodology and theory, as well as the topic under study – all of which are interwoven in complex ways. Consequently that methodological decision-making is never linear

#### **3.21. Feminisms**

As a starting point to my methodological decision making, I will begin with the relationship between the topic under study and the research questions posed. As mentioned in the preceding chapters, I am a stepmother myself and my interest in this as an area of research was initially prompted by my own experience and by anecdotal evidence of the distress sometimes experienced by stepmothers. Particularly pertinent for me was the research that indicated that stepmothers were more troubled than stepfathers with higher reported levels of psychological distress (Nielsen, 1999). Such an apparent gender imbalance indicated a topic that merited further attention and an approach with a nuanced theory of gender. For this reason, my methodological approach is informed by feminist theory. It is therefore the relationship between feminist theory and psychology, particularly psychology's methods that I now discuss.

As psychology was becoming established women were excluded in many ways, often not acknowledged as researchers, not included as participants, and judged against male norms. Weisstein therefore argued that conventional psychology knew very little about what it was like to be a woman stating that ‘psychology has nothing to say about what women are really like, what they need and what they want, especially because psychology does not know’ (1993, 197). Crawford and Marecek (1989) have described the discipline of psychology as ‘womanless’ in response to the way that women and women’s experiences were consistently made invisible, made abnormal, or pathologized. Although there is no single feminist approach or feminist methodology, feminist researchers have therefore looked for methods that move away from such androcentrism to explore the diversity of women’s lives and perspectives thus exposing the mechanisms that have suppressed women’s experiences (Devault, 1996). Within such feminist approaches there has often been an attempt to deconstruct the positivist concept of scientific objectivity (Febraro, 1995). Feminists and critical social psychologists have argued that psychology’s insistence on a ‘scientific’ approach embracing a positivist belief in science as ‘value-free’ is problematic. This is because the experimental methods used are seen to focus only on behaviour ignoring the person in context and therefore lacking meaning (Capdevila & McAvoy, 2016). Indeed, the individuals studied are often called subjects, yet treated as objects ignoring their own subjectivity. In addition, a claim of objectivity denies the subjectivity of the researcher who produces the knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and yet as Parker (2006) argues the researcher is central to the sense that is made.

In order to attend to the gap between objects and our representations of them that is inherent in the positivist approaches discussed above, feminist researchers have often embraced qualitative methodologies, seeing these as more appropriate for reflecting women's divergent experiences (Wickramasinghe, 2010). In these, women's accounts of their experiences are taken seriously as an object of study and analytic attention is paid to context and complexity. This makes visible the diversity of women's lives. The exploration of diversity was particularly relevant to this topic because of the limited attention it has received in the existing literature as argued earlier. A previous study I conducted using Q methodology to explore experiences of stepmothering (Roper & Capdevila, 2010), identified considerable diversity. Thirty one participants produced nine shared but distinct perspectives which described different ways of making sense of being a stepmother. Resonant with my concerns as a feminist, the findings of this study highlighted the importance of undertaking research into stepmothering which emphasises diversity and is more inclusive than pre-existing studies. As implied in my literature review, my aim is also to challenge dominant constructions of motherhood and the hegemony of the nuclear biological family as well as to consider the role of psychological knowledge and practice in these constructions.

Feminist engagement involves a commitment to reflexivity, being aware of and acknowledging the assumptions, values, expectations and interests of the researcher and the way that this impacts on the research (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999, Griffin & Phoenix, 1994). My explicit intent in my research is to contribute to the relevant literature by bringing attention to the troubled identity of stepmother

and, in so doing, potentially inform policies and practices that may mitigate the challenges these women face. This is a lofty ambition and it is a long way from academic research to impacting practice. However, it can be a step in that direction. It will therefore be important to reflexively engage with issues of power within the research relationship and, to ensure that if this work is to benefit stepmothers, it gives an accurate picture of their lives reflecting the complexities and realities (Bhavnani, 1990). Reflexivity allows for the examination of the way in which the relationship between the researcher and participant, the intersubjective elements, affect research and the knowledge it produces (Finlay, 2002). Haverkamp (2005) argues, that by making explicit the processes involved, reflexivity can address the unexamined power inequalities that exist in research as it recognises the subjectivity of the account, allows for alternative interpretations and acknowledges the participants as co-constructors of the research. Similarly, Brown (1997) has pointed out that reflexivity can help to address the ethical concerns that have been expressed by many feminist psychologists by avoiding the artificial separation of *psychologist as researcher* and *psychologist as person* that is inherent in the approach to ethics embodied in ethical codes of organisations such as the American Psychological Association and the British Psychological Society. The artificiality of separating researcher and person is particularly pertinent in this work since, as stated earlier, I am myself a stepmother and consequently immersed in and affected by many of the same experiences and discourses that I am identifying in my research. As a stepmother I am an insider; a member of the community I am researching. Such an insider status may enhance the ability to empathise with

participants, and, whilst potentially helpful in establishing rapport when interviewing, will undoubtedly influence both the relationship within the interview and the analysis. A positivist concern here might be with a lack of objectivity, but, I would argue, as discussed above, that no research is entirely objective and all research includes an interpretive component. The concern here is rather to make the researcher's position transparent and to continually reflect on its impact throughout the research.

### *3.22. Discursive approaches*

My concerns as a feminist researcher therefore drew me to a qualitative approach but it is an understanding of the world as socially constructed that has informed the choice of a discursive approach in particular. A basic tenet of discursive approaches is an interest in understanding not just what is said but the function of the talk. One important contribution to this view of language as action is Austin's (1962) speech act theory. As Austin argued, words are not just about things, they also do things; they are performative. Discursive approaches then are concerned with the ways in which language constructs objects, subjects and experiences, including (in some versions) subjectivity and a sense of self (Parker, 1992).

Language is seen to construct reality as the words chosen to describe something actively construct versions of events rather than simply being representational or reflective (Potter & Wetherell, 1992). As Foucault described, discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak' (Foucault, 1969: 49).

It is worth acknowledging, as Burman and Parker (1993) have suggested, that discourse analysis is a wide term that encompasses approaches with differing emphases, methods and knowledge claims. However, most do share a social constructionist epistemology. They recognise the social embeddedness of experience, the ways that social, cultural, historical, and material factors contribute to the production of subjective and psychological phenomena and, conversely, the ways in which social, cultural and material worlds are made up from phenomena that are, in some measure, subjective. As discussed, all forms of discourse analysis do share a common interest in the construction of meaning through language. As Willig (1999) confirms, there is a premise that language does not just describe, represent or reflect an external reality but constructs our experience of the world. Gergen (1990) suggests that dominant discourses within a culture have a powerful influence on the construction of knowledge and this is apparent within the stepfamily literature discussed in chapter two where the nuclear family model is pervasive. For that reason, one of the research questions in this study sets out to examine the discursive resources that stepmothers draw on to make sense of their experiences, including discourses around family and mothering that are the focus of much of the literature (see Chapter Two).

Some discourses are themselves psychological or founded on work in academic psychology. As Parker (1994, p.2) argues 'everyday accounts of action and experience are the source of theories in psychology and these theories trickle back out from the discipline into the explanations people give of themselves and their lives'. Others have also argued that the relationship between academic discourses

in psychology and broader cultural representations is a reciprocal one (Riley, 1983) and that the discourses produced by academic psychology both inform and reinforce normative policies and institutional practices (Allred, 1996). A detailed discussion of the varieties of discourse analysis is beyond the scope of this work but a very brief outline of the major variants will help to situate the approach being taken in this research.

Discursive approaches range from micro to more macro analytic and from bottom-up (focusing on the details of structure and function) to top-down (more concerned with power and ideology) (Wood & Kroger, 2000). For instance, conversation analysis, which is perhaps the most microanalytic form of discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000) has its origins in ethnomethodology and sociology particularly the work of Sacks (e.g. Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1978). Conversations analysis places greater emphasis on the interactive context than on the language itself. It seeks to understand the rules and procedures that govern the orderly features of conversation examining how conversation is managed and how participants orient to each other in talk (Wood & Kroger, 2000). This might also be described as 'bottom-up' since it looks at the details of structure and function in discourse.

Both Critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) and Discursive Psychology (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1992) look for patterns in interactions and usually focus on talk. Here, there is a more macro view and top down approach with a focus on language use within a particular social and cultural context not just within a specific interaction (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates 2001). Critical approaches emphasize the relationship between language and

power, sometimes take a Marxist perspective and usually focus on social issues and problems (Wood & Kroger, 2000) with an emphasis on emancipatory social theory (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Both Critical Discourse Analysis and Discursive Psychology draw on the work of Foucault and have many similarities with Foucauldian discourse analysis. All have a macroanalytic and top-down approach, looking for patterns more broadly, with a social and historical perspective taken from Foucault's work on the ways that language is constructed and reified through discursive practices. There is recognition here of the way that the available language constrains both what people can say and what they can do (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001).

Poststructuralist approaches deconstruct the idea of a single discoverable truth recognizing the multiple meanings that are available to construct reality (Parker, 1992). Discursive psychology has drawn on poststructuralist theory together with other resources such as ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, the philosophy of Wittgenstein and narrative analysis (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1992). Developing this, Wetherell (1998) argues for a critical discursive psychological approach which synthesizes a post-structuralist approach with a conversation analytic approach. The former has the ability to draw on the wider cultural context to explain why particular things are being said in a particular interaction rather than focusing solely on a small fragment of social life. The latter grounds the analysis in the interaction. Since the interest in this research is in stepmothering and identity I want to emphasize here that the approach being taken incorporates the idea mentioned earlier that language constructs not just



objects, subjects and experiences but also subjectivity and a sense of self (Parker, 1992).

### *3.23. Narrative approaches*

There have long been links between self, life, language and stories in psychology; for example the use of case studies going back at least to Freud. According to Josselson (2011), however, it was Theodore Sarbin (1986) who was probably the first to coin the phrase narrative psychology. Narrative analysis uses narrated texts that may cover a person's whole life story or some aspect of it and is premised on the idea that people make meaning of their lives through the stories they tell (Josselson, 2011). An important concept in narrative approaches is narrative structure; life stories are related following structures familiar from fiction in which there is a beginning, middle and end. In addition characters are described and there is a plot that links sequences of action or events. Particularly relevant to a consideration of identity is biographical or autobiographical work in which identities can be claimed. As Bruner (1991) suggests we make ourselves through our autobiographical narratives. According to Polkinghorne (1988), we use narrative to refashion ourselves and 'revise the plot as new events are added to our lives' (p150). In this way, Phoenix (2010) suggests that unsatisfactory identities can be reworked to provide more emotionally acceptable versions. (It is this understanding that informs narrative therapy and which has been used in research with stepmothers (see Chapter Two, Jones, 2004))

Narrative approaches cannot be treated as homogenous, just as in discourse analysis there are different versions encapsulating differing assumptions. Some of these draw specifically on work in discursive psychology (e.g. Stanley & Billig, 2004), and others may take a broadly social constructionist approach whilst encompassing differing understandings of identity. For example, Crossley (2000) critiques discursive approaches for emphasising the flux and variability of identity which she considers incompatible with the unity and integrity of lived experience. However, as Taylor (2003) argues, the two are not necessarily incompatible. Rather, she suggests, unity is not a pre-existing feature of persons but is accomplished from flux and variability 'in and through lived experience and practices, including talk' (p.196). What is of interest in the current work is the way that a discursive approach to narrative, can offer an understanding of such accomplishment. That is, an understanding of identity work that is not just in the moment but over time, as a 'temporal sequencing of events' (Andrews, 2000, p6). This results in an explicit or implicit reference to a sequence or consequence of events (Taylor, 2007), which, as implied earlier, assumes a particular importance when considering how identity is understood, and it is to a further discussion of identity that I now turn.

### *3.24. Identity*

In traditional cognitive psychological, psychodynamic and psychoanalytic theories (and in some narrative approaches as just discussed) talk is seen as 'epi-phenomenal' (Edwards, 1997) with psychological work including identity located

elsewhere in some interior entity or psychic construct (Taylor, 2007). In addition personal identity research has tended to formulate identity as a feature that becomes fixed in childhood or early adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1952). For Tajfel (1981) social identity is a construct relying on categories rather than an internal state so that a social identity is a form of category. A discursive understanding builds on this since categories are themselves part of language so identities can be discursive constructs. In conversation analytic work, identity is assumed to be made relevant within the interaction and to display 'membership of some feature-rich category' (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998: 2). A principle here is that identity categories and their characteristics are identified through the participants' own orientations. Conversation analytical work thus theorises speakers as active in taking up subject positions within an interaction, in contrast with more Foucauldian understandings in which subjects are positioned in discourse. The latter approach results in a less agentic understanding of the way that identity is determined. This debate or difference between the two approaches inspired my use of the Terry Pratchett (1992) quotation in the introduction to this chapter. We might, simplistically, ask if stories are shaped by people or if people are shaped by stories. Wetherell (1998) addressed this conflict through her 'synthetic approach' (p.405) discussed earlier which focusses on a specific interaction but also draws on meanings from the wider social and cultural context (Taylor, 2005a). Thus we can say that people both shape and are shaped by stories, or as Taylor and Littleton (2006) more eruditely phrased it, people's identities are 'complex composites of, on the one hand, who they create themselves as and

present to the world....and on the other, who that world makes them and constrains them to be' (p.23).

### *3.25. A Synthetic Narrative-Discursive Approach*

It is the synthetic approach to discourse analysis proposed by Wetherell (1998) that is utilised and developed by Taylor and Littleton (2006) in their synthetic narrative-discursive research approach. This expansion of the approach to incorporate narrative addresses a limitation of discursive work that has been raised (in slightly different terms) both by theorists working in the psychoanalytic tradition (as discussed by Wetherell, 1998) and by narrative analysts (e.g. Crossley, 2000 as mentioned earlier). This limitation is the failure to explain the continuity of identity, the persistence of a sense of self (a narrative structure of experience) over time and through different interactions (Taylor, 2006; 2007). Just as ideas and meanings from the wider social context become discursive resources for people's talk, so too will versions of their own previous talk (Taylor & Littleton, 2006) so that a life narrative is built up over time with each construction resourced by previous constructions (Taylor, 2006; 2007) and with each instance becoming both a resource and a constraint. In addition to considering these discursive resources, my analysis has also followed Taylor and Littleton (2006) in finding Billig's (1987) concept of 'rhetorical work' useful. This is talk that takes place on more than one level, responding within the current interaction but also to audiences (or criticisms) that may be imagined or have previously been experienced.

With this approach, the analyst does not look for an extended biographical account as in uninflected narrative analysis. Although attentive to a life narrative, this can be quite minimally constructed in details such as brief references to the past or the future (Taylor, 2005b). In addition to attending to such autobiographical detail, this approach also draws on the narrative form to understand the ways in which speakers take account of established sequences in constructing their personal biographies. Taylor and Littleton (2006) offer the example of 'the dominant coupledness narrative', which suggests a progression through stages of coupledness such as courtship, marriage and parenthood. In a study by Reynolds and Taylor (2005) this is both echoed and challenged by single women. Such recognisable narratives that incorporate expected trajectories are what Bruner (1987) describes as 'canonical narratives' and these form one of the discursive resources that may be drawn on in identity work. Other resources include diverse local understandings drawn from cultures such as the individual's family or workplace whilst a constraint could be the ways in which speakers are already positioned, for example by their appearance (Taylor & Littleton, 2006; Taylor, 2005a). Taylor and Littleton (2006) use the term 'interpretive repertoires' (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1992) for other discursive resources that in some forms of discourse analytic work would be referred to as 'discourses'. There are however some differences in definitions of the two terms. Potter and Wetherell (1987) define 'interpretive repertoires' as 'recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena' they also state that these are 'a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions' and that they are

‘organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech’ (p.149). Parker (1992) convincingly critiques this for three reasons. Firstly, he argues that the term ‘grammatical constructions’ is inappropriate and risks ‘formalism at the expense of content’ (p.11). Secondly, he considers that suggesting that the terms are limited echoes positivist idea of completeness with finite possibilities of meaning. Thirdly, Parker suggests that the term ‘repertoire’ is uncomfortable in resonating with behaviourism.

In the current work, I have used the term ‘discourse’ defined as ‘any regulated system of statements’ (Henriques et al, 1984) rather than the term ‘interpretive repertoire’ favoured by Potter & Wetherell (1987). This choice is informed by Parker’s (1992) critique and by feminist poststructuralist concerns around power and gender (e.g. Baxter, 2003). Of particular importance to feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis is the ways in which discourses become gendered so as to make salient differences between men and women although this is only one of many cultural markers of difference involved in the construction of speaker’s identities (Baxter, 2003). A feminist poststructuralist approach considers the operation of gendered power relations and is concerned with the ways that these are utilised in claims to knowledge (Lazard, McAvoy & Capdevila, 2016). Retaining the use of the term discourse acknowledges the overtly feminist stance taken in this thesis. Although there may be some risks in eclecticism, the synthetic narrative-discursive approach being used in this research draws on poststructuralist ideas so that there is already an affinity between the two. I also note Wood and Kroeger’s (2000) argument that there is strength in drawing on different

perspectives as appropriate for specific projects and Baxter's (2003) suggestion that Feminist Poststructuralism can be used as a supplementary approach. Use of the term 'discourse' is then a slight departure from the approach used by Taylor and Littleton (2006). Another departure from Taylor and Littleton's approach is my extension of their method from its original use with interview data to its application to data gathered from a web forum.

Following Taylor and Littleton (2006), in this thesis, I use the term identity to describe the sense of self under consideration. Other authors have used the term subject for this sense of self, reserving the use of identity to denote a category such as gender or nationality. This might suggest that whereas subject is personal, identity is social, however, as Taylor and Littleton (2006) argue a premise of their work is that the social and the personal are closely interwoven and cannot be easily distinguished. An additional reason for preferring the term identity is that use of the word subject implies subjectification; that is an assumption that a sense of self is conferred rather than agentially constructed. As explained earlier the synthetic narrative-discursive approach being used here understands the sense of self as a composite of the individual's own creation and the constraints of the world. This therefore fits more reasonably with the term identity.

The approach taken in the present research recognises identities as multiple and complex so that, although the attention to narrative allows for an understanding of some continuity in identity there will still be contradictions and inconsistencies (Taylor, 2005a). Some of these may be accepted and may even pass unnoticed but others require repair so that work is needed to maintain a relatively stable version

of self (Taylor, 2003). It is not only such inconsistencies but also undesirable associations that may become a source of 'trouble' (Wetherell, 1998). This concept of 'troubled' identities is particularly useful in my research. Stepmothers face particular challenges as their families do not fit the model of a stereotypical biological, nuclear family and their own biographies do not conform to the canonical narratives of a woman's life. This may mean that the discursive resources needed for their life stories and associated identities are unavailable and the resources that are available may be associated with undesirable identities such as 'the wicked stepmother'. Their identities may therefore be 'troubled' in that they are difficult to construct and difficult to reconcile; different elements, such as 'good mother' and 'stepmother', are in tension. As Taylor and Littleton (2006) suggest these troubled identities need repair such as frequent restating and explaining in order to counter different explanations. This 'trouble' means that identities can only be constructed with considerable work.

### **3.3. Method**

#### **3.31. Introduction**

Having discussed the methodological approach taken in this work, I now turn to consider the details of the method. This section of this chapter looks at how and why the particular data sources used in this research were chosen, how the data were gathered and how they were analysed. It will also cover the ethical considerations and issues that arose in respect of this study. This section is



followed by some reflexive comments on how I am situated within my research and how this has impacted during data collection and analysis.

### *3.32. Design*

This study uses textual data and synthetic narrative-discursive analysis to investigate the talk of stepmothers. It draws on two data sources so as to maximise the diversity of participants as per my methodological approach discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Prior to the start of this project I had conducted a Q methodological study looking at stepmothering (Roper & Capdevila, 2010). During preliminary research for this, I reviewed media coverage of stepmothers. In the process I found an article in a British newspaper by a journalist who had recently become a stepmother. Finding the transition difficult herself, she set up a web forum to support childless stepmothers in the UK. Initial investigation showed that the site offered a rich source of naturally occurring data generated by stepmothers themselves. With around 1300 members the web forum provided access to many more women than could have been included using other qualitative data collection methods. In addition, a review of the literature at the start of this project found that, although there had been some academic exploration of the use of parenting websites, only one study had looked at stepmothers' use of a web forum and this was based in the USA (Christian, 2005). Therefore, with access to a large number of British stepmothers and with little previous investigation of the use of online forums by stepmothers, the web forum was an excellent data source for the current research. However, it had been set up specifically for 'childless

stepmothers', that is, women without their own biological children. From the demographic data available on the site it was apparent that, unsurprisingly, few of the women had biological children but also that older stepmothers, particularly those with adult stepchildren, were not well represented. As women with adult stepchildren have rarely been included in any previous research it was important that such women were part of this study. Individual interviews were therefore conducted with thirteen stepmothers of adult stepchildren, including some who had been biological mothers prior to becoming stepmothers. This allowed for further diversity in the sample.

### *3.321. The web forum*

Researching on a web forum is a form of Internet Mediated Research that may be likened to digital ethnography (Schrum, 1995). It offers naturally occurring data, although this is of course, in a very specific context. In addition to being a fairly novel data source for this topic, and allowing access to a large number of potentially diverse participants, internet data also has particular interest for a study concerned with gender and identity. This is because there have been suggestions that the internet, where anonymity is possible and identities are disembodied, offers opportunities to renegotiate or challenge hegemonic gender relations (Jenson, de Castell & Bryson, 2003; Travers, 2003) and to disrupt idealised versions of identities such as motherhood facilitating greater mobility of identity (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Hardey, 2002; Plant 2000). This view of digital identity has been challenged since, although the body is not visible, it may be difficult to escape one's

offline identity as the virtual world is shaped by social, embodied and cultural experience (Hardey, 2002) and grounded in offline realities such as gender, race and class (Higgins, Rushaija & Medhurst, 1999). In addition, some studies have found that the internet may reflect and reinforce unequal gender power relations, rather than challenging them (Josok, Lagesen & Sorensen, 2003). Whilst the impact of the virtual world on identity and gender relations is therefore contested there has been very little previous research looking at internet usage by stepmothers. Use of a web forum in the present study thus offers an opportunity to explore these issues, particularly to consider whether such a virtual community is empowering for women and whether this is a site for reinforcement or challenge of hegemonic discourses and gendered power relations.

The site 'www.childlessstepmums.co.uk' was set up by a British stepmother in 2006 to provide support for childless stepmothers in the UK. It had just over 1300 members at the time of data collection in late 2010, and membership has increased steadily reaching almost 2400 in 2016. The site owner has appointed a number of moderators who assist her in ensuring that the rules of the site are followed. The site is organised as a forum and is divided into eight sections with each of these further divided into topic areas giving twenty-five topic areas in all. Members can start a thread in the appropriate topic area by posting questions or issues that they are grappling with. Other members then respond to these initial posts continuing the thread with suggestions or comments. In this way it is much like a conversation albeit an asynchronous one. A summary of the sections and topic areas, together

with the number of threads started in the data collection period, is shown in table two.

*Table 2. Organisation of the web forum*

Section	Topic Area	No. of threads started in period
Welcome	Important please read first	0
	Come and introduce yourself	11
	Suggestion box/questions	1
	Media enquiries	0
The people in your life	Your stepchildren	20
	Your partner	16
	The biological mother	11
	Relatives, friends and acquaintances	6
You and your emotions	Have a good rant	14
	Have a good cry	7
	The green eyed monster	1
Being a stepmum	New to this?	2
	Former stepmums	0
	Positive stepparenting	1
	Ideas, activities and fun	1
The Nitty and the Gritty	Custody and living arrangements	6
	Money matters and legal concerns	6
The childless factor	Planning children of your own	3
	Childless but not through choice	4
	Never wanted them and never do	0
	No longer childless	1
And now for something Completely different	Work	4
	Play	17
	Nosh	0
General discussion	General discussion	12
<b>TOTAL 8</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>144</b>

There are rules or guidelines for using the site which are posted in the Welcome Section (Appendix one). These focus on ensuring privacy (all members choose and use a user name) and that the posts are in good taste and considerate towards other users. The moderators reserve the right to remove posts that contravene the rules.

### 3.322. *Interviews*

Interviews have the advantage of allowing an in depth exploration of the topics or themes of interest and the subjective meanings these have for participants (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994), and, when conducted face-to-face with a single interviewer provide a relatively private situation for the discussion of a potentially sensitive topic. A major benefit of using interviews in this study was the ability to access women who are very rarely represented in stepfamily research, and who were a very small minority on the web forum; women with adult stepchildren. The interviews also facilitated the inclusion of more women who had biological children prior to becoming stepmothers. Unlike the naturally occurring ethnographic data from the web forum, interview data is generated by the research and, has sometimes, therefore, been criticised for being somewhat contrived, influenced by participants expectations of social science research and difficult to extrapolate to other settings (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). However, it can also be argued that interviews are quite familiar to most people and can be conducted in a conversational manner which is no more artificial than many social interactions (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). Taylor (2001) also suggests that participants may volunteer to be interviewed because the topic is particularly salient to them at that time and that a research interview may provide a 'congenial performance context' (Taylor & Littleton, 2006; 28) which is pleasurable for participants. My approach to interviewing is informed by my feminism in that this method confronts my involvement; I cannot simply be a detached observer. This makes issues of power

imbalance in the interview salient forcing me to reflect on my part in the research, an exercise that I found very useful and will discuss later in this chapter.

### *3.33. Participants*

#### *3.331. Web forum participants*

As suggested earlier, the anonymity of the digital world may offer some ‘mobility of identity’ and the extent to which online identities are grounded in offline identities is the subject of debate. No assumption can therefore be made that the biographical information provided by stepmothers on the web forum is ‘true’, that is, the relationship between this information and the participants’ offline identities cannot be known. However, this is not problematic within an approach that is sceptical about the idea of a single discoverable truth and that sees language as constructive rather than as a simple reflection or representation of reality. In addition, the interest in this study is in patterns in the ways that discursive resources are drawn on in the performance of identity work so that individuals are not considered as representatives of ‘types’. Biographical data provided by those on the web forum reflects the identity positions being taken up by participants and is, therefore, given here as indicative of the diversity of such positions.

At the time of data collection, in October 2010, the site had just over 1300 members. The majority of women on the site indicated that they were fairly young, typically in their thirties, and in accordance with the site’s original aim of providing for childless stepmothers, most stated, in the biographical information they provided and in their posts, that they did not have biological children prior to

becoming stepmothers. However, there was considerable diversity. Of ninety members who posted during the data collection period, more than half gave their ages and these ranged from twenty-one to forty-nine years. Many (but not all) members also provided other biographical details such as their partner's age, how many stepchildren they had, how many biological children they had, the ages and genders of children and stepchildren, whether stepchildren lived with them full or part-time and the status of the stepchildren's mother. This information, as it relates to the stepmothers who posted on the forum during the research period and gave at least some biographical information, is summarised below in table three. At least one member said that she had a stepchild that had been conceived after the start of her current relationship (i.e. due to her partner's infidelity). One forum member stated that she was in a same-sex relationship. Several forum members' stated that their partners had children from more than one previous relationship meaning that there were two or sometimes three ex-wives or partners involved. There were also two members who stated that at least one of their stepchildren was not biological, that is the child was also their partner's stepchild. Some members said that they were married; others that they were cohabiting and two stated that they did not live with their partner. Two members stated that they were no longer stepmothers but remained members of the forum continuing to offer advice and support to others. Several members also gave information about where they lived (a thread was started asking where everyone was located) and this suggested that the stepmothers on the forum, whilst mostly British, were located across the British Isles with a few spread around other parts of the world.

*Table 3. Biographical details given by web forum participants*

Member age range	21 to 49 years
Partner age range	31 to 65 years
No of members where partner is more than 10 years older than stepmother	13
No of stepchildren range	1 to 4
Age range of stepchildren	3 to 28 years
Have adult stepchildren %	9%
No. with biological children	6 (all with current partner)
Have stepchildren fulltime	7
Biological mother deceased	2

### *3.332. Interview participants*

One of the objectives of the study was to engage with a diverse range of stepmothers in order to include the voices of ‘non-traditional’ stepmothers who are usually excluded from stepfamily research. At the point of recruitment the working definition was therefore any woman married to or in a partnership relationship with someone who has adult children from another relationship. In practice, the women who participated in the interview phase of the study were broader than this since they were self-defined as stepmothers. This included one woman who was not in a relationship at the time of the interview but had been a stepmother during a previous marriage and had recently re-connected with her now adult stepchildren. The interview participants were recruited using purposive



snowball sampling starting with my own networks and thirteen women rapidly volunteered to take part. This sample provided considerable diversity and sufficient data for the project.

No specific biographical information was requested of interview participants as this was not intended to form part of the analysis where the interest is in patterns across the data rather than viewing individuals as representative of particular types of people (Taylor & Littleton, 2012). It was therefore unethical to ask participants for unnecessary information. To meet the objectives of the study it was important that the participants incorporated as much diversity as possible, particularly in respect of features that previous research had identified as salient, for example whether married or cohabiting, heterosexual or gay, whether their partner was widowed or divorced and with or without biological children themselves. During the interviews all the participants volunteered such information as part of their narratives of becoming a stepmother and being a stepfamily. Similarly, participants were not asked for their age but again this was sometimes volunteered and those participants who divulged this information ranged in age from late thirties to mid-sixties. Table four (on the following page) summarises the biographical details available for the interview participants.

*Table 4. Biographical details of interview participants*

<b>P. No</b>	<b>Married/ Cohabiting /Single</b>	<b>is partner a widower/ divorced</b>	<b>Stepchildren</b>	<b>Bio children</b>	<b>Years with partner</b>	<b>Grand mother ?</b>
P1	Married	divorced	1 stepdaughter 20's	No	19	No
P2	Married	divorced	Stepson 40's and non-bio stepdaughter 40's	Son 18 from this marriage	20+	2 step grand sons
P3	Married	widower	1 stepson, 1 stepdaughter, both married.	One adult son	7	1 bio and 4 step
P4	Married	widower	2 stepsons both early 20's	2 adult daughters from previous marriage	10+	2 bio grand daught ers
P5	Single - was married to 2nd husband divorced some years back	divorced	1 stepson, 1 stepdaughter both in their 20's	Son and daughter both 20's	8	No
P6	Married	divorced	1 stepson in his 30's, non-bio stepdaughter in her 40's	1 adult daughter from this marriage	25+	No
P7	Married	divorced	1 stepson, 1 stepdaughter both in their 20's	1 adult daughter from previous marriage	10+	No
P8	Single - was married but divorced some years back	was separated from ex when they met	1 adult stepson	1 son and 1 daughter from her marriage	Not stated	No
P9	Married - 3rd marriage - 2nd in which she has been a stepmother	divorced	3 adult from previous marriage, 2 stepdaughters in current marriage one 16, other non bio 20's.	No	About 6	No
P10	Cohabiting with female partner		1 stepson, 1 stepdaughter both in their 20's	No	About 20	No
P11	Married	widower	1 stepson, 1 stepdaughter both adults	No	About 8 years	No
P12	Married	was divorced ex now dead	2 adult stepdaughters	No	Not stated	No
P13	married	widower	2 stepsons now 30's and 1 stepdaughter 20's	1 son 20's from previous marriage	17	No

As table four indicates, there was diversity in respect of key structural or family features although the interview participants were not very diverse in terms of ethnicity or class. All were white although two were not originally British (one American, one Eastern European) and eleven of the thirteen held or had held professional or managerial jobs such as teaching, lecturing or social work. Whilst this work theorises gender as key in the distribution and deployment of power, there is also a recognition that this intersects with other identities such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, age and ability status and that these are also important in understanding structural inequities (Allen, Lloyd & Few, 2009). By drawing on a large number of participants via the web forum, in addition to using interviews, this research has attempted to be inclusive but a full exploration of all these intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991) is beyond the scope of this work.

### *3.34. Procedure*

#### *3.341. Data gathering from the Web forum*

With the permission of the site owner a message was posted on the site advising members that the research would be taking place and that it would use material posted on the site between 20<sup>th</sup> October and 20<sup>th</sup> November 2010. To ensure that material was analysed in context, only threads started in the specified periods were used. One hundred and forty-four threads were initiated during the period generating eight hundred and fifty-seven pages of data. The data were copied directly from the site and include many typographical and spelling errors, use of the vernacular and abbreviations. These can sometimes be a little confusing but with

Careful reading they were usually intelligible and they have not been corrected or amended since this might unintentionally change the participant's meaning.

Additionally, by leaving the extracts unchanged, the reader has the raw data and is therefore in a position to challenge the analysis presented. The only changes that have been made are to remove or anonymise any names that are occasionally given, including references to other forum users (to protect confidentiality).

Abbreviations are explained using square brackets although a full list of abbreviations is also included (Appendix two).

### *3.342. Arranging and conducting the interviews*

Once the stepmothers participating in the interview phase of the study had shown an interest in taking part they were sent an information sheet and consent form by email (Appendix three). Before starting each interview I checked that the participant had received and read this information and that she was happy to take part. I then asked her to sign the consent form. As a consequence of having recruited interview participants through my networks, several were known to me and others were friends of friends or family. I first conducted a pilot interview with my sister (I reflect on the implications of conducting research with someone I know so well later in the reflexivity section of this chapter). In line with a feminist and narrative influenced approach, the interviews were semi-structured and led by the participants' concerns. An interview schedule was developed (Appendix four) to ensure that the main areas of interest were discussed. This schedule was based on topics that had proved salient in my own previous work (Roper & Capdevila, 2010)

and in other relevant research together with issues that were of concern on the web forum. The schedule was refined slightly after the pilot interview to add the question 'Is there any advice you would give to other women planning to become stepmothers?'

Each interview began by asking the participant to tell her story (as a stepmother) using the following words 'Can you tell me about your family and how you became a stepmother?' In most of the interviews this was sufficient, the participants were keen to tell their stories and it was often clear that they had given considerable thought to what they wanted to say. One woman had even brought a quote from a novel that talked about some of the difficulties of stepparenting. In these interviews the schedule became simply a checklist that I referred to at the end of the interview and I usually found that everything had been covered. However, there were some interviews in which it was difficult establish sufficient rapport, or where the participant was a little less forthcoming and in these cases the schedule was used as a question prompt.

Most of the interviews were conducted in a domestic setting. Where I knew the participant this was usually her own home, in other cases this was the home of the friend or relative who had introduced us. In one case the interview was conducted in the participant's workplace in a quiet office. In every interview I tried to ensure that we had a quiet and comfortable space where we would be uninterrupted. All the interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder and the participants were asked for their consent to this. Participants were not paid to take part, all

were volunteers, but I did give each of them a small box of chocolates as a token of my appreciation.

### *3.343. Transcription*

The interviews were transcribed 'verbatim', that is without any formal transcription system although I did note features that seemed likely to be pertinent in the analysis. For example, where there was a significant pause this was indicated by dots with a greater number of dots representing a longer pause. Pauses were not timed since, as Capdevila (1999) argues it would be difficult to interpret spilt second differences into meaningful analysis making such timings 'both superfluous and misleading' (Capdevila, 1999; 116). Square brackets were used to indicate non-verbal features such as laughter, crying and sighing. In addition, as I was transcribing (listening to each of the recordings many times) and during the initial stages of analysis (also listening to the recording whilst reading the transcript) I made other reflexive notes.

### *3.344. Analysis*

The web forum data were collected first and all the threads were read at least twice. It was apparent that some assessment of the data was needed to determine which threads would be analysed. This was in part because of the volume of data (the web forum generated almost nine hundred pages of data) but also because some of these data were not appropriate or relevant to the focus of this research.

For example, some threads covered topics not related to stepmothering such as exchanging recipes, identifying their geographical whereabouts or discussing favourite films and these were excluded from the analysis. One thread gave such specific details of an individual and her family that inclusion would have risked participant confidentiality and this was therefore excluded for ethical reasons. From the initial data corpus of one hundred and forty four threads started during the data collection period, this left one hundred and thirty threads which were included in the data set for the analysis.

As mentioned above the initial readings and some preliminary analysis of the web forum data was helpful in developing the interview schedule. In particular many threads discussed the relationship of the stepmother to the biological mother of her stepchildren. There was a section of the forum devoted to this topic but it also arose in many other sections. The pilot interview was analysed prior to conducting the remaining interviews in order to consider the schedule and identify any possible changes or improvements and to allow for some reflexive thought on both the conduct of the interview and the analysis.

These initial analytical steps did identify some areas of interest that inevitably had some influence as the analysis progressed but I did not want to define these prematurely but rather to be open to other issues that might be identified as all the data were considered. With this in mind, and because the data set was very large, some initial organisation of the data set was needed to begin the analysis. The transcriptions of all thirteen interviews together with strategically selected threads from the web forum were therefore input into AtlasTi™ to facilitate a thematic

coding. Thematic analysis can be considered a method in its own right but it can also be used as tool within many forms of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The intention here was to conduct a thematic analysis to at least minimally organise the (very large) data set prior to undertaking a more detailed narrative-discursive analysis (as discussed earlier in this chapter). The initial plan was to input all one hundred and thirty threads from the web forum but this proved impractical since the software treated each thread as if it were a single interview participant so that it was not possible to trace highlighted extracts back to an individual participant without making each extract so large that it included a heading with the participant's user name. As the thematic analysis was only the first stage in deciding how to organise the data, the web forum threads used in this process were limited to those topic areas that seemed from previous readings to be most pertinent to the research questions. These were: 'Your Partner' and 'The Biological Mother' from the section called 'The people in your life' and all the topic areas from the section called 'You and Your Emotions'. This initial thematic analysis produced a list of forty-one 'themes' which are listed in Appendix five. The AtlasTi™ software allows text to be given multiple codes, which was useful as extracts were often very rich in referring to several aspects of the stepmothering experience. It would have been possible to continue working within the AtlasTi™ software to further refine and develop the themes but because not all the web forum data had been included, the themes that had been coded were then reviewed and the remainder of the web data re-read to ensure that no major themes were left unconsidered. A particular benefit of this process was that it facilitated a very



thorough immersion in, and familiarisation with, the data. Following this I identified three overarching themes that would provide a framework for my analysis. These form the basis of chapters four, five and six and revolved around the stepmothers' partner, the home and the biological mother (of the stepchildren).

1. For the first of these meta-themes much of the talk from the interviews and on the forum was specifically about the stepmother's partner, who was usually male since most of the participants were heterosexual. As discussed in chapter two, some previous research had identified support from a partner as an issue of some contention for stepmothers (e.g. Orchard & Solberg, 1999) and as potentially protective against psychological distress (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012). With this in mind and given feminist attention to issues of gender together with previously discussed suggestions from the literature that gender is pertinent to the difficulties faced by stepmothers (Nielsen, 1999), this seemed an important focus of analysis. In the initial thematic analysis all of the following themes 'Advising him how to parent', 'dad and kids alone', 'he needs my help' and 'How father handles children' related to male partners. As the analysis progressed and these were considered in more depth, together with other initial themes of 'luck' and 'money', an overarching theme relating to 'neediness' emerged. Again after further consideration this was seen to be constructing men as 'needy' in three different ways; unlucky, requiring help, or in some way incapable. Chapter four was therefore entitled Hapless, Helpless and Hopeless.

2. The topic of home was also frequently raised across the data with many different aspects of home initially coded under a number of different headings perhaps reflecting the multidimensional nature of the concept (Mallett, 2004). In addition to its frequency this seemed a fruitful topic for analysis since the places where we live and our relationships to them are significant in the discursive work of constructing a personal identity (Taylor, 2003). Additionally, as discussed in chapter two, home has particular relevance for women's status and identity (Miller, 2007). Home is also important for fathers in maintaining contact with their children after relationship breakdown (Philip, 2014). Despite these resonances, I had not found this to be a focus of interest in the stepfamily literature. For all of these reasons talk of home therefore became the second meta-theme and the focus of chapter five.
3. The biological mother (of the stepchildren) was a prominent, and often contentious area of discussion on the web forum, suggesting that it was very important to many of the stepmothers involved. This was in line with previous research which had also suggested that this was a significant relationship and frequently discussed by stepmothers (e.g. Christian, 2005; Craig & Johnson, 2011). There were some obvious differences between the ways that biological mothers were discussed on the forum and in the interviews. Although some forum members made positive comments about the biological mother of their stepchildren, the tone was generally very negative. In the interviews there was less negativity and negative comments

were mostly much less strongly expressed. These differences in themselves seemed to offer a fruitful area for further analysis. Due to these differences, the significance of the topic for stepmothers and its prominence in the data, this was chosen as the third meta-theme and is the subject of chapter six.

Having decided on these three meta-themes, the relevant extracts, based on the codings from AtlasTi <sup>(TM)</sup>, were combined with further relevant extracts taken after reviewing the remainder of the web forum data. Care was taken throughout to ensure that extracts were of sufficient length to avoid losing context and as the analysis progressed beyond the thematic coding, transcripts (and original recordings) of interviews and complete web forum threads were frequently referred to in order to avoid decontextualizing the data. This resulted in three (large) data sets that were then worked on individually as the narrative-discursive analysis was undertaken searching for patterns within each of the overarching themes. Web forum and interview data were thus analysed together looking for patterns across the data. However, there was also attention to differences between these data sources recognising the differences between the participants and the contexts of each as discussed earlier.

### *3.35. Ethical considerations*

This research was carried out in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society and received ethical approval from the Open

University Ethics Committee on fifth November 2010. The ethical application document is included as Appendix six.

Since the interest in this research is in patterns across talk rather treating individuals as representatives of types, I have followed Taylor and Littleton (2012) in using numbers rather than pseudonyms for participants. Conventionally extracts from biographical talk in academic work are presented with a pseudonym and often some biographical details such as gender, class and age (Taylor, 2012). This is problematic since it implies that the speaker represents the social categories indicated and is thus speaks for such a collective identity. Additionally, although pseudonyms avoid the reductive implications of role descriptions, they may themselves be indicative of features such as age, ethnicity or class thus informing the way that extracts are read. To avoid these issues whilst preserving anonymity in this work I have used P followed by a number to indicate an interview participant and W followed by a number to indicate a web forum participant. Any other identifying information such as the names of family members or the places where participants live has been removed from both data sources.

Although data on the forum is open to the public gaze, since anyone may join the site, I considered it unethical to use data without attempting to gain consent from the participants. Collecting data from an online web forum is a form of Internet Mediated Research (British Psychological Society, 2013) and has been likened to becoming an electronic ethnographer (Schrum, 1995). This raises specific ethical issues of privacy (level of identifiability) and informed consent (level of observation) (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002, British Psychological Society, 2009). In

order to address these I have considered the suggestions of Sharf (1999), Mann and Stewart (2000), Ferri (2000), Brownlow and O'Dell (2002) and the guidelines of the British Psychological Society (2009, 2013). Mann and Stewart (2000) raise the question of distinguishing between public and private sources; is a narrative public property if it appears on a public discussion forum? Similarly it is suggested in the British Psychological Society (2009) guidelines on observation that, without consent, observation of public behaviour should take place only where people could 'expect to be observed by strangers' (p.25). If the web forum data in this study was treated as public in this way it might be ethically acceptable to use this as a data source without obtaining consent. However, Ferri (2000) suggests that it is important to consider the intended audience and whether this includes a researcher. I would suggest that the stepmothers using the web forum in this study intend their audience to be other stepmothers and might not expect this to include a researcher. In order to address this issue and avoid deception I therefore, obtained the agreement of the website owner and posted a message on the site advising users that I had joined the forum as a researcher (and as a stepmother myself) and would be researching stepmothering by using threads posted on the site during a specified period of one month. Participants were offered the opportunity to contact me and my supervisor by email for further information. This allowed forum users to avoid posting during the period of the research and thus gave the implied consent of those who continued to post. Two women did post saying that they would prefer not to take part and so would not post during the research period. Several others expressed their approval of any academic research

into the experiences of stepmothers. Although this gave implied consent I recognised that this might not be fully informed consent as I could not be certain that all users had read the message. Therefore, in order to ensure informed consent for any quotations used in the analysis I contacted individual members (via the website messaging service) to gain their permission to use their postings in this way. At this stage they were also offered the opportunity to withdraw their data although none of the participants requested this.

After expressing an interest in participating, interview participants were sent an information sheet (Appendix three) detailing the purpose of the research, the way that anonymity and confidentiality would be preserved, their rights not to answer specific questions and to withdraw from the research. The information sheet also explained the reasons for recording the interview and reminded them that they would have an opportunity to see and comment on the transcript. In addition, the information sheet provided my contact details so that they could ask any further questions about the research. For my own protection such contact details were the University address and my University email address. The topic has the potential to raise emotive issues for which participants might later wish to seek help. The information sheet, therefore, also included the addresses of two organisations that offer support and advice to stepparents (see Appendix three). When I met each participant I discussed the research with them and ensured that they had read the information sheet. I asked if they had any concerns, and when they had confirmed that they were willing to proceed I asked them to sign a consent form (Appendix three). At the end of each interview I thanked the participant and reminded them

of their right to withdraw and that they could request a copy of the interview transcript. None of the participants did request this.

### ***3.4. Some reflexive comments***

As discussed earlier, in line with my epistemological position, particularly feminism, I have, throughout this work, continually reflected on my own location within the research. I have therefore included reflexive comments in each of the following analytic chapters but particular issues were raised when I conducted my pilot interview with my sister, and later interviewed two friends for this project. Since these are pertinent to the interview method of data collection, these are considered here.

It is not uncommon for researchers to involve people they know as participants in their research, although this is not always acknowledged, particularly outside ethnographic work (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). However, in this research I found a number of ethical, practical and analytic challenges in conducting a piece of feminist research with participants I know well and I believe that these offer a useful opportunity for reflexivity.

I want first to consider some the ethical issues that I found troubling in conducting this research with women I knew well. It was important to ensure that I obtained fully informed consent from my participants and for that reason hoped that they would carefully read the participant information sheet and consent form.

However, I found that it can be difficult to get someone who knows you well to

take this seriously, suggesting, for example, that there was no need for them to read the information, they would just sign. These people already trust me and I hope they are right to do so but I had to reflect that someone may not really be giving informed consent when they are reluctant to read the information. I was also concerned that a friend or a sister might feel obliged to participate although I emphasised this was their choice. Power is in operation here, not because I am applying any pressure but because people who care for us want to be helpful and this can make it difficult for them to refuse to take part.

There is also a potential issue of anonymity and confidentiality. Since I am not anonymous as a researcher and author I cannot really offer anonymity to a participant where the relationship between us is made transparent through the interview. For example, my sister made several references to 'the way we do things in our family' and 'you know how important Christmas has always been to us'. Reflecting on this I realised that it highlights the way we take for granted a need for anonymity that may not always be necessary or desirable. Participants might sometimes appreciate being acknowledged as co-constructors of the research. Where anonymity is desirable and in circumstances where the relationship is apparent, the researcher is challenged to conceal sufficient detail to provide anonymity for the participant whilst retaining sufficient data for sense. Stephanie Taylor (2013) suggested that one solution to this difficulty is to write up as if the interviewer was not also the researcher. Of course, this is not possible in a PhD thesis but could be done in other circumstances and together with changes of names and other critical details could provide anonymity. I should state here that



my sister has given me explicit permission to mention her in discussing this issue here and that I have not actually used any quotes from her that are identifiable due to our relationship.

It is always possible to cause distress when talking about difficult or potentially upsetting issues and the prevention of harm should always be central to ethical considerations in research. However, when the participant is a friend or relative one also has to take account of the potential impact on your ongoing relationship. Additionally, there may be greater likelihood of causing distress for yourself when this is someone you love. These are difficult problems to avoid and I think that this highlights the need for careful thought in planning research. It also suggests a need for reflexive consideration during analysis of the way that the researcher's concerns about distress and about the ongoing relationship may have impacted the interaction.

In addition to these ethical concerns, practical and analytic issues are also raised by conducting research with known participants. Both within the interview itself and in the analysis one brings previous knowledge to bear, knowledge of the specific issue, knowledge of the participant, and with my sister, our own longstanding relationship. As in much ethnographic work familiarity can provide a useful analytic resource (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), however, there is also danger in analysis of moving too far from the text, drawing on previous knowledge and therefore not making the basis for your analysis evident.

Within the interview itself existing knowledge is taken for granted by the participant and the researcher. Sentences may even be left unfinished as the shared knowledge makes completion unnecessary and this leaves gaps that one needs to allow oneself to notice whilst undertaking the analysis. Of course, a discursive analysis is always looking for 'taken for granted' knowledge, but my awareness that this existed at a very personal level as well as encompassing wider cultural discourses actually challenged me to take a step back from the data, to look at it as if I were a stranger and therefore to notice what was already 'known'. This was helpful in highlighting my subjectivity, even as I tried to step back to be more 'objective'.

There are a number of ways in which I think that the process of involving my sister and some friends in my research has actually aided my reflexivity. As feminist critiques have suggested, it is important to recognise subjectivity and the role and influence of a researcher rather than seeing this as a source of bias in research (Bhavnani, 1990). The artificiality of the situation is brought into sharp relief when you are talking to someone with whom you normally have relaxed and comfortable conversations. In the interview with my sister I was strangely nervous, she was speaking (at least at first) in a very slow, considered and clearly rehearsed way that is perhaps not unusual in an interview, but was made salient to me because it is very unusual between the two of us. It was also apparent that because the topic was constrained by my research needs the conversation did not flow in anything like a normal way, I didn't interject with my stories I just offered acknowledgements such as 'Mm' or 'Yeah'. In this way I felt, during the interview,

when transcribing and when reading the transcript, that I was being a 'researcher' not a 'sister'. This has obvious implications for the way that power is balanced in this situation. The topic had been decided by me, I even had an interview schedule listing topic areas for discussion, almost like an agenda in a formal meeting and it sat on the table between us. Power imbalances may be more apparent when research participants are very different from the researcher, where they might be seen as 'other', for example, due to cultural or gender differences (Burman, Alldred, Bewley, & Goldberg, 1995; Frith, 1998) so the difficulty I had here helped me to notice the power differential in a situation where it was less expected and so to consider how this might impact on the data generated (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

I had considered myself an insider in my research, a stepmother myself and therefore in an ethnographic sense an insider in the group I was researching. I expected that my familiarity with many of the issues would be a useful analytic resource and helpful in developing rapport within the interview. However, with my sister I was an insider as a stepmother and as a member of her family and yet, here I was also outside the situation taking a very different role in a very familiar relationship. Although unintentional, this is very much like the ethnomethodological technique of breaching (Garfinkel, 1967). In this the researcher intentionally breaks the usual social rules to make the familiar strange and this unexpected strangeness seems to me to provide a useful opening for reflexivity. One of my interviews was with a friend of many years and she made a number of comments such as 'you may think this is awful of me' and 'perhaps I

shouldn't have...but'. These made me consider who such appeals were to. She and I had discussed many of these issues in the past and I had never expressed disapproval of her behaviour. In this way, again, the artificiality of the interview situation was brought to the fore and her awareness that what she was saying was being recorded and would have an audience outside the immediate context, was apparent. It was also very difficult for me not to interject with reassurance but at the time I worried that this might move the interview away from her. Reflecting on this afterwards I wondered if perhaps at some level I was holding on to a positivist attitude, attempting to be an 'objective scientist', certainly I was positioning myself again as 'researcher' not as 'friend'.

I also found it very difficult when any participant who I knew well, was expressing anger or upset about things that had happened within her family, this made me increasingly uncomfortable. As I've already suggested taking a researcher role rather than being 'sister' or 'friend' has implications for power within the interview context but this is not necessarily straightforward. As researcher I am powerful in setting the bounds of what can be talked about but when a known participant, a good friend or a sister expressed anger or distress about their experiences I actually felt very powerless because I considered myself constrained by the context to be a researcher rather than offering support or empathy in the way that I would have done in other circumstances.

Overall then, in a number of ways my shifting status as insider/outsider, researcher/sister/friend placed me in an ambiguous position that was a source of some tension and discomfort (Ribbens & Edwards, 1998; Kanuha, 2000). However,

such tension and discomfort also offered opportunities to more fully consider the nature of my role at different stages of the research process and to acknowledge shifting power balances. For this reason I concluded that the challenges and tensions raised in talking to my sister and some friends opened a useful space for productive reflections on issues that are important feminist concerns in research.

### ***3.5. Chapter summary***

I began this chapter with a quotation from Terry Pratchett which raised a question about the relationship between stories and people. This is important to the discussion of methodology that forms the first section of this chapter. The introductory chapter of this thesis and the review of the literature in chapter two have highlighted the need for this research. In these chapters I discussed the prevalence of stepfamilies and the limited research focus on stepmothers and their families. I have also drawn attention to the previous research which has found that stepmothers suffer greater distress and difficulties than stepfathers. For these reasons I have suggested that this is a topic requiring further attention and for which it is appropriate to draw on feminist theory. In the first section of the current chapter I therefore discussed the relationship between feminisms and psychological methodology noting feminist critiques of positivism and the benefits for feminist endeavour of qualitative approaches and a commitment to reflexivity. I have then discussed the synthetic narrative-discursive methodology used in this research, locating this within a range of narrative and discursive approaches. An explanation was included of the conceptualisation of identity inherent in this

methodology and of the idea of 'trouble' in identity work. This has brought me back to the quotation from Terry Pratchett with which I began the chapter to suggest that people both shape and are shaped by stories as they work at 'troubled' identities. I have also discussed some departures from the methodology developed by Taylor and Littleton (2006) upon which my approach is based. In the second part of this chapter I have looked in detail at the methods used. This included a consideration of the study design with two data sources, how these were chosen and participants recruited. Also discussed in this section is the process of data analysis and the ethical issues involved. The final section of this chapter offered some reflexive comments on the process of data collection and analysis.

Having identified the need for this research and explained the approach taken in the current study, this thesis now moves on to the analysis of the data. This is considered across three chapters in which the analysis is illustrated with quotations from the data. Chapter four looks at stepmothers talk about their male partners, chapter five discusses talk of home and chapter six examines talk about the biological mother of the stepchildren. These empirical chapters are followed by a final chapter which summarises the main contributions of this research.

## Chapter Four

### Hapless, helpless, hopeless (or why men need us)

#### **4.1. Introduction**

Unsurprisingly, across the data set, stepmothers often talked about their partners and, as most of the women were in heterosexual relationships, this talk was usually about men. In the initial stages of analysis I categorised such talk under a variety of themes. These included: 'Advising him how to parent', 'dad and kids alone', 'he needs my help' and 'How father handles children'. However, as the analysis progressed and I considered these in more depth, together with other initial themes of 'luck' and 'money', an overarching theme that seemed to relate to 'neediness' emerged. Again after further consideration I see this talk as constructing men as 'needy' in three different ways; unlucky, requiring help, or in some way incapable. It is such talk that is considered in this chapter and entitled hapless, helpless and hopeless.

This sort of talk by women about men is not exclusive to stepmothers, indeed it is a very recognisable trope with the hapless, helpless, hopeless man epitomised by fictional characters such as Homer Simpson in the television programme *The Simpsons*. Some feminist theorising has also offered similar constructions of men. For example Mary Daly and colleagues (1987) in their *Wickedary* associate masculinity with folly and failure (of men and male dominated institutions) and Luce Irigaray (1985) defines masculinity as a condition of lack, vulnerability and weakness ironically mirroring Freudian ideas about women's lack of genital

equipment and of moral development. In all of these we see an inversion of a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). So this type of talk is common but, as discussed in chapter three, the interest in this context relates to the particular challenges that stepmothers face since their families do not fit the stereotypical biological, nuclear family and their own biographies do not conform to the canonical narratives (Bruner, 1987) of a woman's life. I have argued that their identities may therefore be 'troubled' (Taylor & Littleton, 2006) and it is such 'trouble' that is explored throughout the analytic chapters of this thesis. As discussed in chapter one, as women take on stepmothering roles they have to create new, morally acceptable, identities. I would also contend that stepfamilies, particularly in the early stages of their formation, are part of a family network where much work needs to be done, by both biological and step parents, to establish new ways of enacting family and parenting across households. As Philip (2014) found, this can offer opportunities to rethink gendered patterns of care. I would therefore suggest that the discourses utilised can be central to either challenging or reifying gendered constructions of parenting.

As explained in chapter three this analysis considers patterns that are found across the data with extracts given as examples. Since the focus here is on patterns across the data rather than on individuals as representative of a 'type', this discussion follows Taylor and Littleton's (2006) approach of using participant numbers rather than pseudonyms (see chapter three for a full discussion). To distinguish between interview and web forum participants the former have a number preceded by a



letter P and the latter a number preceded by the letter W. The interviewer was always the researcher and is indicated by the initial S.

In this chapter I will argue that by constructing men as in some way 'needy' these discourses open up particular positions for the speakers and the analysis will show how these offer ways to enact repair to 'troubled' identities. This discussion is presented in four strands each of which constructs men in different ways, these are; 1) In need of rescue, 2) Hopeless at 'emotional work' and relationships, 3) Incompetent, weak or inadequate as fathers and 4) Damaged. The first is a narrative of rescue, perhaps reminiscent of the knight on a white charger, in which the stepmother constructs her partner as in need of saving opening an opportunity for a powerful position for herself to come to the rescue and save her partner. This is clearly a gendered narrative in classic fairy tales and legends, we expect a male knight rescuing a maiden in distress and the inversion apparent in the talk of stepmothers is reminiscent of the inversion of this myth (based on the folktale of Bluebeard) in the Angela Carter (1979) story *The Bloody Chamber* where the mother rescues her daughter from decapitation by a wicked husband. The second strand looks at talk that constructs men as hopeless at relationships and emotional work, with their children, more generally and within the couple relationship itself. Such talk positions women not only as the 'kin-keepers' but also sometimes as 'second-best' either to their partner's previous wife or to his children. The third strand focuses on the key topic of men as fathers and considers constructions of men as incompetent, weak or inadequate as fathers. The positions this opens up for stepmothers is examined as they discuss their attempts to compensate for

these inadequacies either by direct action or with advice and support. The final strand considers ways in which men are discursively constructed as damaged and the positions this may offer women to nurture and repair. This is followed by some concluding comments about the interconnections and impact of these various ways in which men are thus constructed as in some way hapless, helpless or hopeless.

#### ***4.2. In need of rescue***

There were many examples throughout the data where men were constructed as hapless, helpless or hopeless and in need of rescue. The initial examples feature rescue from financial difficulties. This seems particularly important since money and legal problems were a strong theme especially in the discussions on the web forum data where relationships were often fairly new and children were usually younger so issues of finance were, perhaps, more salient. I started all my interviews by asking 'So can you tell me a bit about your family and how you became a stepmother?' Participant thirteen then gave me some brief history followed by this first extract:

##### *Extract 1. Interview with Participant 13*

P13. So it was a kind of a fairly gradual process building a relationship, um, and it was quite difficult for me to build the relationship with his children to start with I think you know I was quite wary that there would be perhaps an element of resentment

She then told me about some of the difficulties there had been in building relationships with her stepchildren including feeling that her own son was being ignored by her stepchildren. She then continued:

*Extract 2. Interview with Participant 13*

P13. ...um but [my partner] and I moved in together, fairly quickly actually, he had financial difficulties after his wife died he was trying to run the business um with three children.

I would suggest that there is some conflict or tension here between the 'fairly gradual process of building a relationship' (with the stepchildren) and the explanation that follows only a short while later that the couple had 'moved in together, fairly quickly'. I will return to this idea of a tension shortly as this may have some power to aid understanding of the function of the rescue narrative that follows. The final part of extract two seems to draw on hegemonic gender constructions. He had financial difficulties because his wife had died and he was trying to run the business and take care of the children. Implicit here is the understanding that taking care of the children had been the wife's job and his breadwinner role is compromised by having to take this on. However, this understanding of why the financial difficulties arose becomes more complex as the interview continues:

*Extract 3. Interview with Participant 13*

P13. I think he's a very trusting, quite naïve at times, person, a very lovely man but very naïve very trusting of people um I think he got taken advantage of by some, some people were wonderful with him, helped an awful lot. [S. Mmm]

P13. After she died, other people seemed to take advantage of the situation, so he ended up practically having a nervous breakdown.

In this extract the partner is shown as hapless and helpless by virtue of being 'very trusting, quite naïve at times' and this is reinforced as it is followed by the more emphatic phrase 'very naïve, very trusting of people'. This naivety and trust has led to him being 'taken advantage of' and again this phrase is emphasised by repetition and leads to the awful consequence that he 'practically had a nervous breakdown'. So both financial and emotional difficulties are shown to arise not just because the loss of his wife leaves him as both breadwinner and carer for his children, but because he is weak in being trusting and naïve so that he is taken advantage of. This is a construction that shows him as neither enacting a hegemonic version of masculinity as financial provider for his children, nor being the 'new father' (Marzano, Capdevila, Ciclitira & Lazard, 2009) offering both financial and emotional support to his children.

Two further extracts from the same interview expand on the financial consequences and demonstrate how the stepmother comes to the rescue.

*Extract 4. Interview with Participant 13*

P13. Um because he'd been made bankrupt when the business went down um it was difficult, we did try and get a mortgage together but he....

S. He couldn't?

*Extract 5. Interview with Participant 13.*

P13. Because it was very difficult um, so we moved in together, we had to get find somewhere with at least four bedrooms which was quite a struggle so I took on a big loan. [S. Yeah]

P13. And I took on a bit of a loan on top of the mortgage as well but so the two, his oldest two boys had to share a room. [His daughter] had a room and [my son] had a room.

Here we see how the stepmother 'comes to the rescue' when her partner doesn't conform to the breadwinner model and can't provide financially for his family.

Taking the biographical narrative across these extracts and returning to the earlier point about tension between the explanation of a gradual process of relationship building with the children and the later statement that she and her partner moved in together 'fairly quickly', suggests a purpose for the rescue narrative that follows. It functions as prolepsis; rhetorical work that offers a justification and defence of her actions against an assumed criticism (Billig, 1987; 1991). Perhaps this is needed because for a woman in the situation of forming a complex stepfamily (where both partners have children prior to the relationship) the canonical narratives of relationship formation and mothering are not echoed in her experience. She may therefore anticipate criticism for failing to adequately mother her own child who she suggests was being ignored by her partner's children and who she positions as vulnerable by saying that he was 'only a little boy really'. She might also anticipate criticism because by moving in together 'too quickly' she has failed to put all the children's needs first, in line with the discourse of the idealised selfless mother.

Rescue from financial difficulties also features in the next extract, again together with emotional rescue. The extract, posted by W1, is taken from a section of the

web forum entitled 'Come and Introduce Yourself' and the thread is titled 'I'm new to all this...'. After a brief introduction the stepmother explains how she met her partner and goes on:

*Extract 6. Post by W1*

His wife had stated that she wanted a separation over a year and a half ago, but they had been living in the same house as they've been unable to sell it. They have 1 son, 13.

Over this time period, she has made his life a misery. Whilst they were leading separate lives in the same house, she wanted to maintain control over every aspect of his life. I watched his emotional health deteriorate more and more rapidly, as he was unable to cope with the situation, but unable to move out due to the financial constraints of mortgage/bills etc.

I felt that the only escape for him was to offer and discuss the possibility of him moving in with me. I have a small 2 bed house not far away. Their plan all along was to go their separate ways and have total joint (50/50) custody of their son. I therefore knew that this offer would involve me clearing out my small study and turning it into a bedroom for his son to stay every other week.

He was totally grateful for my offer, and still tells me so.

This idea of financial rescue in these extracts seems to invert the normative gender binary. It offers a very strong and powerful position for the stepmother in contrast with the weakness of her partner. This might be important because throughout this data, and in other work, stepmothers often express feelings of powerlessness since they have to live with children who are not theirs and who they did not choose and

they may have little control over decisions about financial support for stepchildren and ex-wives, when children visit or how they behave (e.g. Jones, 2004; Henry & McCue, 2009; Roper & Capdevila, 2010).

It is also apparent that rescue is not easy; it involves sacrifice for the stepmother. In extract five the stepmother 'took on a big loan' and 'a bit of a loan on top of the mortgage'. Here the use of the expression 'a big loan' and the mention of an additional loan on top of the mortgage emphasises the exceptional nature of what she is doing. Similarly in extract six it is clear that the stepmother is giving something up (her small study) in order to rescue her partner. That this is recognised by him as a sacrifice is evidenced by his being 'totally grateful for' the offer and continuing to express this gratitude. This rescue narrative might then offer a powerful position for the stepmother as she takes financial control and may also invoke an idea of sacrifice (perhaps powerful in itself) that is more in line with gendered notions of caring and particularly of the selfless mother. So although in some ways this rescue narrative might invert the normative gender binary it may not necessarily challenge it. This is further demonstrated later in the interview with Participant thirteen.

*Extract 7. Interview with Participant 13*

P13. because I suspect they probably didn't even know [she is talking about her step children] and might not even know now that um like for instance when we moved in together I was paying all the bills um and perhaps didn't realise why then I was getting resentful. [S. Yeah].

P13. um and I don't think they really knew for a long time that the house was all in my name. They obviously do now but they didn't um and I think..

[S. Right.]

P13. I understood and I wouldn't have said anything to them because I think that was you know [my husband] was still trying to be the provider you know that was his..

S. Difficult isn't it?

P13. Yeah.

S. to do it without undermining the position for him, yeah.

It is clear here that both the participant and the interviewer understand the breadwinner model as normative and acknowledge that it is important for the partner's identity. The stepmother's sacrifice is hidden from the children in order to support her husband's identity as 'the provider'. This understanding is supported by research that has pointed to the continuing salience of the economic provider/breadwinner identity for men (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012).

However, stepmothers are not always constructed as rescuing men from financial disaster; indeed, they may be seen as quite the opposite, financially disastrous. This extract demonstrates such a contrasting case and is from the web forum posted in the section 'Your stepchildren' in a thread entitled 'What type of relationship is possible?' The original post was from a woman who had fairly recently become a stepmother to two adult stepchildren and was asking for advice about improving her relationship with them. Several other forum members are stepchildren as well as stepmothers and some of these posted responses from the stepchild's viewpoint.



*Extract 8. Post by W66.*

I think my dad's partner is going down the stepmother from hell route too. My dad would not help me with my postgrad course, not a bit, saying he was broke, but he paid for the rest of the year's school fees to keep her kid in a private school. She's also persuaded him to leave his house to her in his will, which she does not live in nor contribute to. She is going to be nicely set up - my Dad is 16 years older than her, so she will have a house worth about a quarter of a million over here as well as her house in her home country. I on the other hand cannot afford to get on the property ladder at all. I think she is probably a gold digging Leatherface mark 2!

Sorry for the hijack - I'm sure you're nothing at all like that! At least it helps you to see that you don't need the poison apples and witches outfit!

*Extract 9. Post by W82.*

Gold diggers is right! What is with these women?!

Oh I forgot Leatherface (sorry that's my nickname for my SM [stepmother]) is truly, deeply and utterly in love with my father..... 's credit cards...! ;D

This construction of stepmothers clearly draws on two widely culturally available narratives; the wicked stepmother of myth and fairy tale, here referencing Snow White as it is invoked by talk of 'poison apples and witches outfit' and the younger woman as a 'gold digger' marrying (an older man) for money. Stepmothers as second wives and partners are often significantly younger than their partners (Crohn, 2006) so these are accusations that many stepmothers may fear. Thus, by

offering a narrative of financial rescue (as discussed in relation to the earlier extracts) a stepmother may pre-empt an implied or anticipated criticism on these grounds and emphasise her own identity as neither a wicked stepmother nor a 'gold-digger'. It is also apparent in these two extracts that the stepmothers involved are drawing on their personal experience of being a stepchild and having a stepmother. The use of a rather dehumanising nickname (Leatherface) and the construction of some stepmothers as 'other' with this and the use of the phrase 'these women', also serve to differentiate the speakers from such stepmothers in general and from the behaviour of their own stepmothers in particular. In this way they can perhaps make a claim to a more morally admirable identity. Jackson (2013) notes how categorical formulations such as 'these women' or 'these people' often contribute to hostile action by distancing the referents from the speaker and others involved in the interaction.

Support or rescue is not always financial but may also be emotional as shown earlier. For example, in extract six where the two aspects were closely linked. Here his 'emotional deterioration' is attributed to his wife who 'made his life a misery' but with escape impossible because of financial constraints, until the stepmother came to the rescue. The attribution of blame to the ex-wife is a frequent discourse in these data (indeed this is further discussed later in the present chapter and constructions of ex-wives and partners are the subject of chapter seven) but here it is perhaps noteworthy that rescue may also be from the ex-wife or partner. This may be important for the identity of a stepmother, who is by definition never 'the first' yet faces a culture in which there are canonical narratives of love as 'one and

only', a meeting of soulmates (Leslie & Morgan, 2011) and of marriage and children as the culmination of a romantic story where passion grows into a consummate love (Shumway, 2003; Sternberg, 1988). With the attribution of blame on the ex-wife these narratives are both resisted and subverted. The ex-wife is constructed as a 'false love' allowing the rescuing stepmother to position herself as the 'one true love'. This relates closely to my second strand which considers ways in which men are constructed as hopeless at relationships.

#### ***4.3. Hopeless at emotional work and relationships***

An example from participant nine demonstrates the difficulty of not only not being the first partner but often having to come second to the children:

##### *Extract 10. Interview with Participant 9*

P9. and I quite often ended up thinking that we'd organised to do something the two of us and I'd get dumped at the last minute because the opportunity arose for him to have the kids and he couldn't bring himself ever to say no or didn't want ever to say no..um and after a while in 2007, in the early part of 2007 I came to the realisation that you know I felt something stronger for him than he felt for me and that I didn't think the relationship had any prospects and that I'd asked over a repeated period of time... to be ..um..I can't quite think of the word to say this but the words I'd actually used were to say you know like I don't need I'm quite secure in my own thoughts I don't need to be number one all of the time. [S. No]  
P9. but I can't be doing with never being number one. [S. Right.]  
P9. I have to be number one a bit of the time

The difficulty for the stepmother of never being 'number one' is not constructed here as an inevitable consequence of the situation nor does it suggest that it is appropriate to always put the children first (as discourses of both intensive parenting and selfless mothering would do) but rather this is seen as a result of her partner's weakness. His inability (or disinclination) to say no to his children is not framed as good parenting but as a lack of feeling for her, leaving the relationship in jeopardy. Participant nine's statement that she doesn't need to be number one all the time, and her obvious struggle to make this point, seem to suggest recognition of the tension here between what is acknowledged as good parenting (sometimes putting the children first) and what is needed to manage the couple relationship. However, although the idea of not being number one is common in these data, this may relate to the previous wife rather than the children and responsibility is not always attributed to the partner. For example, in the following extract from a post by web participant thirty-four entitled 'Very frustrated and upset', the stepmother discusses her concerns about her partner's distress when his ex-wife doesn't get in touch to talk about their son. She says:

*Extract 11. Post by W34*

I think I'm just looking for evidence to back up my greatest fear that he will never get over BM [Biological Mother - his ex-partner] and I'm just someone he's settling for.

After some reassuring responses from other forum members she continues:

*Extract 12. Post by W34*

I guess my responsibility lies in how I interpret his feelings. When he gets upset that she hasn't made contact, I probably wrongly assume

that he's upset because he feels she's rejecting him, but I'm sure you're all right when you say he's upset because it looks like she's rejecting SS [Stepson]. I wish I wasn't so sensitive around this stuff. I always think that I'm second best to BM [Biological Mother].

Here the stepmother has been encouraged by the reassurance of other forum members to take responsibility for her feelings of being second best so that there is no suggestion that her partner's behaviour needs to change but rather that she needs to manage her own emotions to stop being 'so sensitive'. Similarly web participant eighty-five in a post simply entitled 'Help!', also describes feeling 'second best' but again she looks for advice and support from the other forum members to cope with her emotions rather than suggesting that her partner might need to be more sensitive to her and less 'hopeless' at understanding the impact of his behaviour.

*Extract 13. Post by W8.*

We have the kids every other weekend and Thursday evenings for dinner. My partner is due to move in with me next month and I really need some advice and support coping with all these emotions. Having to hear about all the past (I was even called the BMs [Biological Mother's] name the other day by my partner!) and how much he misses the 'normal' family environment, putting the kids to bed every night, being there etc makes me feel like second best.

Here it seems that the father is expressing his need to undertake the routine activities of fathering, the 'normal' and it has been suggested that such daily tasks are significant in facilitating both the exercise of paternal authority and emotional closeness (Philip, 2014) for 'post-separation' fathers. This may be particularly

important where fathers have only part-time contact with their children and are perhaps trying to avoid becoming the 'entertainment dad' (Sunderland, 2000). However, this conflicts with the stepmother's needs in the couple relationship since it serves as a reminder that she is not the first and this is further emphasised when she is called by her predecessor's name. Such reminders of previous relationships are frequently discussed in these data, particularly on the web forum and sometimes there are suggestions that it is not simply the stepmother's responsibility to manage her own emotional response but that partners do need to increase their own sensitivity to the hurt their behaviour can cause and the damage it may do to the relationship. For example, in a post entitled 'Find the resentment hard to bear....' web participant twelve describes her distress at the practical difficulties of her situation:

Extract 14. Post by W12

... cramped in my one bed flat with no spare room for the skids because HE gave BM [Biological Mother] his house and therefore he has no money and lots of debt despite having a well-paid job.

However it is not just the difficulty of this situation but reminders of her partner's previous relationships such as being mistaken for his ex-wife in the bank (where he still has a joint account with his ex) and his pointing out the house where his first ex-wife lives, that seem to cause the greatest distress. As this participant says:

Extract 15. Post by W12

It's funny as he's so caring but he can be dreadfully insensitive.

Web participant twelve initially takes responsibility for her feeling of resentment by asking the forum members for support in coping with it, by suggesting that she might have CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] to help her manage her feelings and by absolving her husband of responsibility saying:

Extract 16. Post by W12

I don't think there's much more OH [Other Half] can do to help me.

However, although there is some reinforcement of this position, some other forum members take a different approach. For example:

Extract 17. Post by W38

Whilst we can't get away from our OH's [Other Halves] past as due to the skids [stepkids] they are prevalent in our lives, there are certain things our OH's [Other Halves] can do to make things a little easier and pointing out where he used to live with his 1st wife is not something you don't [*sic*] need to know.

In a later post web participant thirty-eight says:

Extract 18. Post by W38

They just don't get it at times do they, yes we all have a past, but his past is still in your present!

This demonstrates an understanding of the issue of not being 'the first' as a common problem for stepmothers, having his children in your life means that 'his past is still in your present'. It also, perhaps, draws on a discourse of a hegemonic masculinity in which emotional work is feminized and men are lacking in understanding of emotion, they 'don't get it'.

Men may also be described as more generally hopeless at managing or maintaining relationships outside the couple relationship, including their relationships with their children. For example participant eight explained that her ex-husband has, for years, had little contact with any of his three children:

*Extract 19. Interview with Participant 8*

P8. but um that's the biggest amount of contact they've ever had in ten years

S. Oh right

P8. And now they just, well you know what men are like, they don't bother that much.

Here, again, his unwillingness to work at his relationships with his children is framed as a common and widely recognised behaviour in men 'you know what men are like', a behaviour that the interviewer is expected to immediately understand. Framing men as typically poor at relationships or emotional work opens this as a space for women to occupy either as kin-keepers or as emotional workers. Taking up a kin-keeping role is discussed in the following examples:

*Extract 20. Interview with Participant 12*

P12. ....because they don't often write emails but when they write emails to [their father] they copy me.

S. Oh really? What in case you two don't talk to each other. [Laughs]

P12. No I think because he doesn't pick up his emails and they think I am going to pick up my emails and I'm going to tell him 'look'.

S. Aah, to make sure he gets the news.

P12. Yeah, but that again I think it's quite sort of nice.



In this the stepmother is positioned, to some extent, as kin-keeper by her stepdaughters although this is a position she takes up willingly. Extract twenty-one provides another example of a stepmother facilitating communication between father and children with the use of technology, something she suggests her husband 'would not have got around to doing' and here this is the stepmother's own initiative (the stepson was working abroad at the time).

*Extract 21. Interview with Participant 4*

P4. ....But when we skyped that was my suggestion and my computer, I don't know whether [my husband] would have got round to doing that.

This failure of men to maintain relationships with children is also evident in my interview with participant eleven where she talks about how she takes on a kin-keeping role indirectly by suggesting that her husband contacts his daughter.

*Extract 22. Interview with Participant 11*

P11. Yes that's right. So I did say to him 'you must'. He's like most men you know. They don't always make as much effort as they might. [S. No.].

P11. And I say to him you know phone [his daughter], meet her in London for a day. Just do something. Go and see her or...

S. He does that when you prompt him?

P11. Yeah, he does and he's always really good you know when she's moving and stuff, he'll always get a van and goes over and he does everything he can to help.

Just as in extract nineteen, this failure to maintain relationships (at least without prompting) is framed as a common aspect of male behaviour. It is 'like most men' and 'you know what men are like'. Thus there is no real criticism of individual men,

this behaviour is almost inevitable. In extract twenty-two Participant eleven also tempers her criticism of his failure to keep in touch with his daughter without her prompting by saying that 'he is really good – does everything he can to help'.

This acceptance of men as inevitably poor at managing relationships, is reminiscent of an argument put forward by Thompson (1991) in her 'Distributive Justice Framework'. She suggests that much of the family work that women undertake, particularly the 'attentive and coordinative aspects' (such as keeping in touch with relatives), are not noticed and become invisible forms of labour. Because of this, Thompson suggests such activities are not given their proper weighting in couples' calculations of distributive justice. Indeed studies have found that although women continue to spend much more time on childcare and domestic work than men, this division of labour is often not seen as unfair (e.g. Baxter, 2000). This is a topic that I will discuss further in chapter six.

In the following extracts the stepmother demonstrates a more pro-active approach to kin-keeping and is clear that without her efforts she expects that her husband's relationship with his son will suffer. Implicit here again is an understanding of men as inevitably hopeless at managing relationships in this way leaving a space to be filled, a position taken up by the stepmother.

*Extract 23. Interview with Participant 2*

P2.... he was thirty, I arranged a little party for him here with my family who he got on very well with um....similar ilk um..and um and we carried on. It tended to be me that asked him here.

S. Right, rather than [your husband]?

P2. Rather than [my husband]. I would always say shouldn't we have him over, shall we ask him down for dinner?

Later in the interview she explains that she no longer has any contact with her stepson and that because of this he no longer visits their home and has less contact with his father, she continues:

*Extract 24. Interview with Participant 2*

P2. ... and you know I said to [my husband] your relationship will suffer because it's me that's holding it together.

As I suggested earlier it is not just in keeping in touch with family or friends that men may be positioned as hopeless but also in the emotional work necessary to maintain or manage relationships. An example is shown in the following extracts from my interview with participant three.

*Extract 25. Interview with Participant 3*

P3. And taking probably a social work role and frankly I have done a, he [her husband] has been on my case list and I think he's my permanent case list.

[S. Yes.]

P3. I still say he's a good kind loving man but not insightful, extremely talented in many ways but lacks that. [S. Yeah.]

P3. Which is interesting in that both of his children are quite warm and insightful.

S. Yes, yes but you think that that came from their mother really?

P3. Mm and her ability to manage, or cope with [her husband] [laughs]

*Extract 26. Interview with Participant 3*

*[Participant three is talking about when she and her husband married]*

P3. I think also it's a relief for [his son] and [his daughter] because he [her husband] was very dependent on them.

S. Much more so than you were on your son?

P3. Yes because I'm much more...

S. independent?

P3. Emotionally autonomous, I mean we all need support.

In extract twenty-five this participant talks about 'managing' her husband as if in a professional capacity, this constructs him as helpless. This is emphasised by talk of him as dependent on his children in extract twenty-six since this is a reversal of the expected direction of dependency in a parent-child relationship (at least until very old age). It is suggested that because of his helplessness, he needs to be managed, but in contrast to earlier extracts there is no blame attributed to the previous wife (in this case deceased) rather she is constructed both as someone who 'managed or coped' with her husband's emotional limitations and as able to inculcate emotional capability in her children. This draws on 'traditional' constructions of femininity as incorporating caring and emotionality (in contrast with a 'traditional' masculinity which is hard and rational) but this also suggests an understanding of a 'new' masculinity that must incorporate traditional 'manly' attributes together with emotionality and caring (Marzano, et. al., 2009). These changing discourses of masculinity also frame contemporary constructions of fatherhood but it has been argued (e.g. Dermott, 2008) that there is still a gap between the discourse of new fatherhood and men's actual participation in child care. It is therefore discussions of men as fathers that are considered in the next section of this chapter.

#### ***4.4. Incompetent, weak or inadequate as a father***

In order to contextualise this discussion I want to re-emphasise some points that I touched on in chapters one and two. There I suggested that as part of the neoliberal philosophy upheld in the UK by recent New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments, with an emphasis on individual responsibility, self-management and management of risk (Phoenix, 2004), there has been a change in the demands placed on parents (Featherstone, 2010). The word parent has always been a noun indicative of a particular relationship, with the word 'parenting' being used as a gerund or verbal noun meaning the 'the care and upbringing of a child' (Collins, 2000). However, in more recent usage the word parent is often used as a verb; 'to parent', and this usage has developed alongside the growth of 'intensive parenting' (Hoffman, 2010). Parenting has thus moved from being relational to being re-framed as a job requiring particular skills and expertise (Gillies, 2006). As discussed in chapter two this requirement for intensive parenting places considerable pressure on parents making parenting a source of risk and anxiety (Phoenix, 2004). This may be a particular pressure for some types of parent with its tendency to marginalise any family that is 'other' than the normative heterosexual, white, middle class, able-bodied, nuclear and two-parent.

Additionally, the changes in understandings of contemporary masculinity and fatherhood that were discussed in chapter two require men to become involved and caring fathers in addition to providing for their children economically (e.g. Dermott, 2008; Henwood & Proctor, 2003; Marzano, et .al., 2009; Wall & Arnold, 2007). I have previously argued that such requirements may be particularly onerous for fathers who do not live with their children full-time. Highly relevant to

the discussion here is the article that I quoted from briefly in chapter two from the Sunday Telegraph. In this the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, talked about the need for fathers to provide both financial and emotional support for their children even if they are separated from them. Polly Toynbee (2011), writing in the Guardian also quoted from that article noting that David Cameron also wrote "It's high time runaway dads were stigmatised and the full force of shame was heaped upon them. They should be looked at like drink-drivers, people who are beyond the pale. They need the message rammed home to them that what they're doing is wrong: that leaving single mothers, who do a heroic job against all odds, to fend for themselves simply isn't acceptable." However, as Toynbee goes on to point out, this, and his point about the need for fathers to provide support, came only days after the welfare reform bill in which the Child Support Agency will charge mothers an upfront fee of £100 for pursuing won't-pay fathers, and will then take a permanent commission of between seven percent and twelve percent for collecting the money. As Toynbee says 'This is part of the "big society" idea, to withdraw state provision from sorting out family financial affairs. Cameron's "force of shame" will make society so "genuinely hostile" for non-paying fathers that the state can stop pursuing them.' This is clearly part of the neoliberal agenda of individual responsibility but a discourse that shames fathers who do not live full-time with their children also positions stepfamilies as 'other' and creates a difficult environment that is unlikely to be helpful for relations between parents who are separated. Indeed, as Segal (1990) suggested, whilst it is important to involve men in childcare as part of a struggle for equality in the home, there is a risk that if the

importance of fatherhood is emphasised this also emphasises the importance of the heterosexual nuclear family, again constructing the stepfamily (and other family forms) as 'other'.

With this context in mind I turn to consider the data where a lot of talk about parenting is framed as 'advising' him how to parent his children. For example, in my interview with participant one, we are talking about suggestions she makes as to how he should parent his daughter.

*Extract 27. Interview with Participant 1*

S. But would he usually agree with you, if you said 'I think it would be better if she..' you know? Would he take that on board as a genuine?

P1. I think so yes, yeah. I mean what I've said about the way he was with her, I suppose some of that was to do with, and I'm sure this is very common to people in his position, not wanting to discipline her about not discipline but just setting boundaries really or making such a big fuss about anything so that everything was perfect for [his daughter] 'cos I think he was just scared she wouldn't want to come again and er..

And similarly in the interview with participant three this extract follows complaints she has been making about her stepdaughter's bad behaviour.

*Extract 28. Interview with Participant 3*

S. and did you, when you, did you try to talk to him about dealing with her behaviour and how did you?

P3. I tried to support him because I actually felt very sad for him because he honestly did the very best he could and he felt guilty about when his emotional difficulties had negatively impacted on her.

In research with mothers looking at constructions of father's roles in childcare, Petrassi (2012) identified a construction of fathers as 'shirking' (in contrast with the selfless mother). However, in extracts twenty-seven and twenty-eight, although the stepmothers here do construct the fathers as failing in their parenting responsibilities, this is not seen as 'shirking' rather it is framed as 'understandable'. In extract twenty-seven the stepmother explains that it is not just her husband, this failure to provide discipline and set boundaries is common to people in his position and he does it for the understandable reason that he is scared of losing his daughter. Similarly, in extract twenty-eight the husband's failure to 'deal with' his daughter's behaviour is described as understandable and forgivable because he did the best he could. Also evident in extract twenty-seven is the impact of the 'new father' discourse. The father's guilt is referred to indicating that he is expected (and according to this account, himself expects) to understand the emotional aspects of the relationship with his daughter in addition to recognising a need to act, in a more traditional fathering role, as disciplinarian. This understanding of guilt is also evident in the following example in which the stepmother suggests that her husband sees himself as a poor parent and feels guilty because of it.

*Extract 29. Interview with Participant 9*

P9. and and you know what he said was [his daughter] needs me to parent her better and 'I am not a good parent' and he maintains that to this day that he is not a good parent and actually I think he is a fairly crap parent and I'm really hoping that if he has some counselling it will help him overcome the feelings of guilt or antipathy or whatever. [S. Yeah.]

P9. not antipathy what's the word I'm looking for? A just sort of lack of engagement a fundamental lack of engagement I think ...



Sometimes stepmothers take a more direct role than simply advising their partner on caring for his children. The following extracts are from a thread started in the section about 'Your stepchildren' by a stepmother who now has her stepchildren living with her full-time and is looking for advice. These are extracts from the responses.

*Extract 30. Post by W57*

Despite only being a week and a half into being a fulltimer, I can obviously sympathise. It is hard, you shouldn't have to have any responsibility - but ultimately you are in the 'mum' role whether you like it or not, not [sic] matter how much you try to stop it!! OH [Other Half] is a bloke and they just tend to end up causing more problems if you leave it all up to them, they need our support!

*Extract 31. Post by W77*

I suppose there is one thing I would say, sometimes I think as a F/T [Full-time] stepfamily you have to forget the 'his kid his problem' approach for your own sanity. From a personal perspective no man (certainly not my OH [Other Half] anyway) notices or even feels as frustrated by certain actions/behaviours as I do. As difficult as it is sometimes it is easier and more beneficial to take control of certain situations, obviously this depends on the age of the child/length of your relationship. But at least sometimes it lets an issue get resolved which often just doesn't happen if you are waiting for SS [stepson] to change/OH[Other Half] to notice/ remember he promised to deal with such things.

*Extract 32. Post by W67*

It's like having a job where even when you leave the office, you're still on call. You can't just totally relax and forget about it. That responsibility is always there hanging over your head. It's a huge life changing event and it takes an adjustment period to learn how to cope with it. You will be required to make a lot of sacrifices because you married this man who has a child. He won't get how hard it is for you, but we do. Keep posting, honey. We're here for you.

In these extracts men are constructed as hopeless and in need of support in relation to caring for their children; 'blokes tend to end up causing more problems if you leave it all up to them'; 'no man notices or even feels as frustrated by certain actions/behaviours as I do'; 'they don't remember to deal with things'; 'they need our support'. However, there is no challenge to the status quo as we see in extract thirty 'you're in the mum role whether you like it or not' and this is going to require selflessness as web participant sixty-seven says in extract thirty-two 'you will be required to make a lot of sacrifices'. This draws on the discourse of an idealized unselfish mother and suggests a gendered expectation that childcare is a woman's responsibility and that 'the mum role' will be taken up by the stepmother. There is also an issue of control here, overtly stated in extract thirty but perhaps implied in the other extracts here and, as discussed earlier, taking control may be a way to manage feelings of powerlessness that are often expressed by stepmothers.

This next extract from my interview with participant twelve demonstrates how partners may differ in their expectations of the stepmother's role.

*Extract 33. Interview with Participant 12*

P12. Er...I just thought something er, I think this is based on one recent occurrence. I thought that [my husband], for instance, expected me in that

particular situation but it was almost like he expected me to act as more as a mother than a friend sort of. I mean 'cos it was a conflictual situation and er um I did step in, and I think I managed to calm down the situation, but again it was it was as a friend you know, sort of rather than as someone in authority.

S. But you felt he had a different expectation?

P12. What er yeah you know he said to me 'can you do something?' you know, 'can you do something?' and I thought 'Oh clearly there is yeah', but again I don't know if he maybe said something as a partner.

Like many stepmothers this participant is significantly younger than her husband (Crohn, 2006), not much older than her stepdaughters, and she is clear about her role as 'friend' to her stepchildren. This is similar to the work of Church (1999) whose study found that stepmothers often described their role as 'older friend' and Erera-Weatherley (1996) who described some stepmothers as adopting a 'friendship style'. However, this stepmother is less sure about her husband's expectations of her and the mothering role is easily invoked and difficult to resist.

It is not only men who may have expectations of the stepmother taking up a mothering role, such expectations may also come from the children as is evident in the following extract from my interview with participant four. She is talking here about interacting with her stepsons prior to her marriage.

*Extract 34. Interview with Participant 4*

P4. [My stepson] would come home from senior school and the atmosphere would change completely, I'd have to give him a snack, they'd have a snack, they never had any food, they never had any food because it was the day before [my husband] went shopping and [my stepson] would come up and

say 'Oh I can't have that one that crisps, packet of crisps are for tomorrow and there won't be any left ..'

S. Oh dear.

P4. And one of the things they said was 'when you get [married], when we're with [Participant 4] will we have meat, will we have biscuits?'

S. [Laughs] So they were looking forward to an improvement in the cuisine?

Here, as I said to her during the interview, participant four suggests that her stepsons expected an improvement in the catering when she married their father.

This constructs the father as less competent than the stepmother in feeding his children and positions her in a mothering role with both the competence and responsibility for ensuring that the children are properly fed.

These constructions of men as 'understandably hopeless' in their role as fathers is reminiscent of Sunderland's (2000) finding of men positioned (in parenting texts) as 'mother's bumbling assistant'. And of course this leaves mothers (and stepmothers) positioned as the main parent, 'the selfless mother' with no challenge to the gender binary.

However, although there were many examples of men being constructed as hopeless in these data, there are occasional counter examples. For example, in this extract from my interview with participant four there is praise for the way he is with her children (his stepchildren) and with his step-grandchildren. Of course some of these tasks, such as handiwork and 'fixing things', are more traditionally masculine.

*Extract 35. Interview with Participant 4*

P4. if I'm absolutely brutally honest I think life would, I know [my husband] would say this, he'd say 'you hate [my stepson]', But I don't hate [my stepson], I just find it difficult, difficult, but yes I'd rather be with [my husband] without the children and I sometimes pull myself up and I think he's marvellous with my children. [S. Mm.]

P4. And I do tell him that, I mean they phone him up for advice on handiwork and.. [S. Aah]

P4. He looks after the grandchildren. [S. Yes.]

P4. Because I can't do it on my own. [S. Yes.]

P4. He was round doing stuff; he's the one more than [my daughter's] dad that drives up to help [my daughter] out. [S. Mm.]

P4. He'll fix stuff when her dad doesn't and they know that and they appreciate it but I don't and I did wonder whether the boys would mind, I don't think they do though, I don't think they do.

What can be seen here is appreciation and gratitude, he is 'marvellous', although this participant claims that her daughters appreciate their stepfather whereas she does not, she is, in fact, expressing a great deal of appreciation in this extract. As Hochschild (1989) suggests in her 'economies of gratitude', this constitutes his contribution as a 'favour' whereas women's contributions, such as her own expected improvements to the catering arrangements, are often assumed as duties.

#### **4.5. Damaged**

In this section I turn to consider some extracts that construct men as damaged. This is a particular type of helplessness or hopelessness for which, in these data, the man in question may be shown to have some responsibility but where someone

else is usually also held accountable. It is also noteworthy that in these data this accountability is always to another woman although this can function in different ways dependant on whether the other woman is an ex-wife or the partner's mother. The first extract here is from a thread on the web forum in the section on Your Partner and it is entitled 'We're separating'.

*Extract 36. Post by W76.*

Ladies,

Last night I made a decision that DH [Darling Husband] & I will need to separate, at a minimum we need to live in separate home as I can't continue with the situation. It feels as if I had a moment of clarity - DH is not 'fit for purpose' he has too many issues to deal with and those issues (BM [Biological Mother i.e. mother of the stepchild] & SD [Stepdaughter]) are draining my energy.

I kept a diary of all the days I've felt sad, stressed and emotional and the impact on my life is too high. We made poor choices all driven by BM [Biological Mother] & SD [Stepdaughter] and DH's [Darling Husband's] ability to put his head in the sand.

In this extract the stepmother describes her husband as so damaged that he is not 'fit for purpose', a term that is perhaps more usually applied to inanimate objects rather than people, and which therefore seems to dehumanise him thus supporting her proposition that they separate. I note here that the mention of a diary as a record of 'all the days I've felt sad, stressed and emotional' adds evidence and thus weight to the veracity of the claim that she is suffering in the situation. This supports her decision to end the relationship, or at least to live separately. As discussed earlier when considering men as poor at relationships, this extract also highlights the difficulty of his past creating issues in the present. Additionally,

although the stepmother takes some responsibility for the situation when she says 'We made poor choices', she also attributes blame both to her husband for his hopelessness in 'putting his head in the sand' and to his ex-wife and the stepdaughter. This attribution of blame to the ex-wife for damage to a man is frequently invoked. A further example comes from the following extract which was discussed earlier in relation to the rescue narrative.

*Extract 37. Post by W1*

His wife had stated that she wanted a separation over a year and a half ago, but they had been living in the same house as they've been unable to sell it. They have 1 son, 13.

Over this time period, she has made his life a misery. Whilst they were leading separate lives in the same house, she wanted to maintain control over every aspect of his life. I watched his emotional health deteriorate more and more rapidly, as he was unable to cope with the situation, but unable to move out due to the financial constraints of mortgage/bills etc.

Here the ex-wife's behaviour is discussed as responsible for 'making his life a misery' which leads to a deterioration in his mental health. However, again he is shown to have played a part since he is somewhat helpless in being 'unable to cope'. By discursively attributing blame to the ex-wife she is constructed as damaging to him. Thus, just as in the earlier discussion of stepmothers as second wives who may feel second best, the ex-wife or partner is shown not be a 'true love'. This opens up a position for the stepmother to offer care to repair the damage demonstrating her moral superiority and her rightful position as number one.

Yet it is not always ex-wives or partners who are blamed for the damage sustained by men. Their own mothers may also be held responsible. This is from a post in the 'Your Partner' section entitled: 'Disengaging when you have your own + stepkids...'

This participant is responding to a post in which another stepmother is complaining about her partner's failure to provide for them financially.

*Extract 38. Post by W22*

He seems to have came [sic] from very spoilt stock and this is such a shame I think in some mothers.

My OH [Other Half] was spoilt in the fact that his mother did hardly anything with him and his two younger brothers then when she remarried and along came the baby...they were all that bit older and she was away having family time, holidays etc...with her husband and kid.

A further example comes from another response to the same initial post.

*Extract 39. Post by W31*

He sounds like a child in a man's body. His willy works ok - so he's got 4 kids - but he doesn't have the emotional intelligence to see that he has responsibility that goes with this.

I can almost here [sic] him whining 'I'm doing my business - it's for the future', 'I don't want to move, I like it here, I need to be here', 'I need to go to a party, I've been so busy all day long, why don't you come you've done nothing'. He needs a reality check. Plain and simple.

Mummy is bailing him out. He's immature, he can't stand on his own two feet. Nothing he does is a great success, his business isn't paying (hey my business doesn't pay but I am out here working FULL TIME as well as running it!) but he can't be arsed to get out there and earn some money and help support you and his kids.



Such mother blaming draws on psychological discourses (as discussed in chapter two) that emphasise the centrality and importance of the mother-child relationship (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991) offering highly gendered ideas of parenting and holding mothers responsible for the way their children turn out (Marshall, 1991). In these extracts we also see reference to men as lacking in emotional intelligence as discussed earlier and in this last extract this is linked to lack of maturity. Damage here has been caused by his mother 'bailing him out' so that he fails to mature and therefore remains 'a child in a man's body'. This construction of 'a child in a man's body' is emphasised by the focus on the part of his body that has unquestionably reached maturity since it has allowed him to father children. It is interesting that the speaker in extract thirty-three does not know the man she is speaking about (except from his partner's posts on the forum) yet she uses a form of (almost) reported speech. This has been called ventriloquizing (e.g. Bakhtin, 1981; Tannen, 2007) and in doing this, speakers temporarily borrow the identity of another in order to communicate their own ideas or meaning, they speak not for another but as another. In this instance the device seems to support this forum member's implied insight into the cognitions of the man in question, she demonstrates both her understanding and, what she sees as his unrealistic views. This adds weight to her judgement that he is unrealistic ('he needs a reality check') as does her next statement which directly compares his approach to building a business with her own, thus emphasising her own identity as both hardworking and responsible.

This invocation of men as damaged reflects the way that families may be seen as damaged by divorce, for example Visser and Visser (1979) describe stepfamilies as

'born of loss' and, of course, much research focusses on damage to the children of divorced parents. A stepfamily is always the result of this damage, of failure, it troubles the romantic narrative of boy meets girl and lives happily ever after and it troubles the ideal of the biological nuclear family. Participant three expresses some of this when she compares her previous experience of being a stepmother (with a man who had been divorced as she had also been) with her current situation where her husband was a widower when they met.

*Extract 40. Interview with P3*

P3. I would say there's a lot of happiness there and I think becoming a stepparent, I've known it as a negative thing but then that was a very, very damaged family.

S. Yeah, yeah.

P3. This family, and even the, and I did say in my head I said all these damaged men that are divorced, I said they are so damaged and I think in my mind somebody who's widowed might not have all the baggage and I think my baggage was decades old dealt with and it wasn't a live issue.

In earlier extracts stepmothers acknowledged the inevitability of 'baggage' or 'issues', the idea that his past is always with you in the form of his children and his ex-partner. Here, this participant suggests that the issues that arise from relationships that end are not inevitably damaging but can be dealt with and put in the past rather than remaining live. However, she ascribes the ability to deal with issues in this way to herself whereas men, or at least divorced men, are all branded as damaged. This claim is thus to a more mature identity than is being accorded to men.

Sometimes in these data men are not just described as damaged but are discussed as if they were barely human. Under a thread entitled 'OH [Other Half] has left to go and stay at a hotel for a few nights' Web participant seventy responds to the stepmother who has started the thread as follows:

*Extract 41. Post by W70*

Give him a nice long leash - so long he doesn't even notice it, and he'll come back and want reassurance from you.

Give him a short leash, and they always struggle with the closeness.

(I am presuming that men are like dogs, but I wouldn't know! ;))

This resonates with the assertion made by John Gray (1992) in his popular book 'Men Are From Mars, Women Are from Venus' that men resist commitment and are like rubber bands, pulling away from women until they are at full stretch and then springing back. He suggests that women should not, therefore, pursue men but should allow them to pull away and come back when they are ready. This may be critiqued as poor science and as sexist, but the way it is paralleled here suggests that it is widespread in the public consciousness. Another participant also likens men to dogs in her response in extract forty-two:

*Extract 42. Post by W61*

... some men are very much like dogs - in more ways than you could possibly imagine... ;)

(The jack-russelling (dry humping when both parties are fully dressed) being a particular favourite of many...)

Constructing men in this way, as less than human or, as in some of the previous extracts, as lacking maturity and not fully responsible adults, positions them as incapable. This leaves stepmothers positioned as needing to enact care and to repair the damage and perhaps also to be the mature and responsible partner in the relationship, unless, as in extract thirty-six it signals the end of the relationship and acts as a justification for such a decision.

#### ***4.6. Some reflexive comments.***

In my introduction to this chapter I observed that most of my participants were in (or had become stepmothers in) heterosexual relationships and talk of their partners (or ex-partners) is therefore talk about men. However, in an attempt to represent some of the diversity of the stepmothering experience, I had managed to recruit one interview participant who was in a same sex relationship and one of the web forum members also stated that she was in a relationship with the mother of her stepchildren. Although this is a very limited sample I was concerned not to sideline these women, particularly as my own partner of many years is a man and I am very aware that talk of men as in some way 'hopeless' is common in my own discourse and very familiar to me. I also wanted to see if their contributions could offer additional insights. I therefore reviewed all of the data from these participants to see if these contained contrasting cases rather than conforming to the patterns identified elsewhere. Interestingly the quote from the web forum in

extract forty-one was posted by the self-identified lesbian stepmother. It is not, therefore, a reference to this stepmother's own partner, but rather a reflection of a wider view of men in general. Additionally I found that this web participant and my interview participant who was in a relationship with another woman, both occasionally offered constructions of men as hopeless (or less than adequate) at parenting in relation to their stepchildren's father. However, neither of them ever constructed their partners as hapless, helpless or hopeless, suggesting that such constructions may, indeed be, widespread and highly gendered.

As discussed in chapter three there are many differences between the interview participants and the women using the web forum and many differences between the two contexts so that although this work is focussed on looking for patterns across all the data, I have also tried, during the analysis, to remain attentive to potential differences between the two data sources. However, although there are some differences in the strength of the language used, examples of constructions of men as hapless, helpless and hopeless were found across both data sources.

#### ***4.7. Chapter summary and some concluding remarks***

Stepfamilies, whilst numerically common, do not fit with stereotypical notions of family as biological and nuclear and stepmothers' experiences do not parallel the canonical narratives of women's life stories. For these reasons such families have to work to establish new ways of enacting family and parenting, often across households. This can offer opportunities to rethink gendered patterns of care and these discourses can be central to either challenging or reifying gendered

constructions of parenting. Stepmothers may also have to work at establishing identities that are troubled and difficult to construct since they may be in conflict with culturally available discursive resources and therefore in need of repair. I have suggested that by constructing men as in some way 'needy' these discourses open up particular positions for the speakers which may offer ways to enact such repair. In this chapter I have identified four specific ways in which men may be constructed by stepmothers as hapless, helpless or hopeless. However, these are complex families in varied and often complex situations that are not easily reducible to such simple divisions. So, although I see these 'themes' as a useful tool for exploring and understanding some of the ways in which stepmothers may take up or resist particular identities, I would not wish to suggest that these are the only themes that could have been drawn from these data, or that they are entirely discrete. Indeed I see the four themes as overlapping and interwoven. In the rescue narrative male partners may be constructed as helpless in failing to live up to a hegemonic masculine role as breadwinner and therefore to be in need of financial rescue. They may also be constructed as in need of rescue from emotional difficulties and this clearly overlaps with the idea of men as hopeless at emotional work in managing relationships and with constructs of men as damaged since such damage is usually shown to be emotional or psychological. Additionally, discourses of men as hopeless at managing relationships include reference to their limitations in relationships with their children and this is therefore closely linked to constructions of men as inadequate as fathers.

Across these themes I have proposed that constructions of men as helpless, hapless or hopeless can offer a contrasting position of power and control for the stepmother and that this may be an important repair in a situation where a woman feels that she has little control over key aspects of her life, including the existence of her stepchildren. I have also discussed the ways that discourses that demonstrate a stepmother's financial contribution and sacrifice may act to counter an anticipated accusation of being a 'gold-digger' or a 'wicked stepmother'. By framing men as in need of rescue, hopeless at relationships or damaged, stepmothers may offer a justification for actions for which they may fear criticism, particularly for not putting the children first, for example for moving the couple relationship forward too quickly or even for ending the relationship. A further trouble for the stepmothering identity is that it does not fit with canonical romantic scripts. Stepmothers are never the first and they face a constant reminder of their partner's past; his previous relationship(s), in the form of his children. With this in mind, it is apparent that constructions of ex-wives and partners as responsible for causing damage to a man, or for leaving him in need of rescue, counter an idea of the ex-wife or partner as a true love and thus open this position for the stepmother who may demonstrate the sacrifices she has made to justify such a claim. These data have shown that women may often find themselves positioned in a way that makes it difficult to resist taking up gendered positions such as managing kin-keeping and emotional work or taking on mothering tasks and responsibilities and that whilst men are often framed as inadequate in these areas this may be constructed, not as criticism but, as understandable in the circumstances. So,

although, at times, there may be some inversion of 'traditional' gender roles, this is very limited and constructions of men as hapless, helpless and hopeless offer few opportunities for men or women to challenge the heterosexual gender binary. This frequently leaves stepmothers with difficult roles and yet they continue to make sacrifices in their attempts to care for partners, children and stepchildren, often with limited recognition of, or support for, their own needs. It is evident from these data, as has often been claimed in previous research (e.g. Bernstein, 1989; Neilsen, 1999; Johnson, et. al., 2008) that this can result in considerable distress for women.



## **Chapter Five.**

### **Home is where the heart is? (or why there's no place like home).**

#### ***5.1. Introduction***

In this chapter I turn to the topic of home, a place that may indeed be 'where the heart is' if it is shared with those you love the most but also potentially a place of inequity or oppression. Home was a frequently raised topic across the dataset although occurring in discussions of many different aspects of the lives of the stepmothers who participated in this research. This is perhaps a reflection of the multidimensional nature of the concept of 'home'. Mallett (2004) suggests that across a varied and multidisciplinary literature, home may be conflated with or related to house, family, haven (or refuge), self, gender and journeying, I would add to this the idea of home as a repository of material objects that provide links to the past just as Brown, Reavey and Brookfield (2012) found in their study with adoptive parents. In addition to its frequency across the data these multiple meanings suggested that this would be a fruitful topic for analysis, particularly as stepfamilies will initially have to find suitable housing and set up a new home (although not always in a new house) and will often operate across households and with new definitions of family.

The concept of home is also particularly pertinent to this study for three reasons. Firstly, as a number of authors suggest, it can be a key issue in identity construction, the focus of this study. For example Cooper (1974) draws on Jungian ideas suggesting that the fundamental archetype of a free-standing house is often a symbol of the self, Tucker (1994) proposes home as an expression of subjectivity or

as a place where people can be comfortable enough to express their identity, the philosopher Kuang-Ming Wu (1993) sees home as a place of reciprocal acceptance where 'I' comes into being in relation to an-other and the other can become 'my hell and my home' and as Taylor (2003) notes, talk about the places where we live is integral to the discursive work of personal identity construction. Secondly, as Philip (2014) found in her study of post-separation fathering, home takes on particular significance for fathers, after divorce or separation, as a space in which they can have an active role in their children's lives that allows for ordinariness and daily activity. Where the father has re-partnered this clearly has implications for stepmothers. Thirdly, there is a strongly gendered aspect to meanings of home. Home has been seen as an essentially private, domestic and female space (Mallet, 2004), in contrast with the more masculine space of public life. Although, this simplistic distinction can be challenged in the face of the increased engagement of women in paid employment outside the home, research continues to find that women have a double burden as they continue to undertake a larger proportion of domestic tasks than men (Dixon & Wetherell, 2004; Lyonette, 2015) and may thus experience home as a site of inequality or subjugation. Home may also be oppressive, particularly to women, as it can be a place of tension wherein power is negotiated between stronger and weaker members and it may also be a location of violence or abuse (Wardhaugh, 1999).

Many of these ideas of and around home have resonance in the experiences of stepmothers as expressed in the data in this research. In this chapter I discuss culturally available and more local discourses that are invoked in the talk of home

in these data. Just as in the previous chapter, I am interested here in the way that stepmothers may take-up or resist, repair or construct particular identities within these as they work at their 'troubled' identities (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). The chapter is divided into two main sections; the first deals with home as a physical space or place including ways in which space can (or cannot) be made for everyone, the timing of moving in together and the care of the physical space through housework and domestic tasks. The second section considers more emotional or relational constructions of home looking at talk of home as a place that may be invaded, a place where one may feel excluded and home as a potential refuge and place to be yourself, to be (or not to be) 'at home'. These two sections are followed by some reflexive comments and a chapter summary including some concluding remarks.

## ***5.2. Home as a physical space***

### *5.21. Making space for everyone*

Several participants talked about the ways that they had tried to accommodate the needs of all the family members when they got together. In this first extract participant four is talking about the reactions of her two daughters (who were teenagers) and two stepsons (who were younger) to the news that she and her partner planned to marry. Here the needs of the children are prioritised, as this participant makes it clear that as a couple they are taking account of her younger daughter's wish to not have her stepbrothers moving into the home she and her sister shared with their mother. It is also made apparent that the couple are

committed to ensuring that there is enough 'space for all four children'. In this way she positions herself and her husband as responsible parents and stepparents. Although the focus here is on the provision of physical space, this has an obvious emotional parallel, to make space for everyone is itself an act of caring and, making space for someone in your home (a private and intimate place), may reflect a space made for them 'in your heart', just as may be implied in the aphorism I have chosen as a title for this chapter.

*Extract 1. Interview with Participant 4*

P4. [My eldest daughter] flung her arms round me and said that was great, [My youngest daughter] said 'I'm not having the boys living here, those boys living here' and I said 'no, no we'll get a house, a different house' and er um the boys went 'uh, okay' and just gradually got used to being told what was going to happen and um that was January and we did, we said we're going to sell both our houses buy a house together so that they all have space for all four children and get married and so that's what we did.

Later in the interview she provides further context for this decision by drawing on her own life story.

*Extract 2. Interview with Participant 4*

P4. The other thing is I was very aware to do it very gradually. [S. Yeah.]

P4. 'cos when my mum met her new partner she met him, she had a blind date in the September she came home and said to me there were stars in her eyes, and I was in my bedroom I was fifteen or sixteen or whatever and she got married in December. [S. Mm.]

P4. And I had to go and share a bedroom with a stepsister who I hardly knew.

S. Oh is that what happened you had to share a bedroom?

P4. Yeah, because they were going to move into um his, my stepfather's

house.

In sharing her own experience in this way she demonstrates not only a moral position as a good parent who puts her children and stepchildren's needs first, but that she has a real understanding that this is important for all the children. In extract one she even 'voices' (Lauerbach, 2006) the words of her daughter and her stepsons<sup>2</sup>This seems to add weight to an implicit claim that she is sensitive to the children's needs. In this she contrasts herself with a 'bad' mother and stepmother, in this case with her own mother (who was also a stepmother) as an example. The suggestion is that her mother failed to consider her children's needs fully because she was blinded by her own emotions; she had 'stars in her eyes' and therefore focussed on the needs of her fledgling romance rather than her family. This echoes the way that, in the previous chapter, women constructed, and resisted identifying with, particular versions of the wicked stepmother by drawing on their own life stories and experiences as children and stepchildren. It also highlights the tensions, for stepmothers, between a romantic narrative, where the couple have time without others, and the demands of children, an issue that I will return to as it arises throughout these data.

However, whilst the provision of adequate space for everyone might be an aspiration, it is not always easy to achieve. For example in extracts three and four,

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<sup>2</sup> This is very similar to what has been called 'say-foring' or 'ventriloquizing' (Goffman, 1974, 1981; Tannen, 2010) but I am using the term voicing as Lauerbach (2006) does because, although this does animate an absent speaker, it is not done in a mock-representational way where it is apparent that the speaker's words are being put into the mouths of others, rather it is understood to be a reporting of another's words.

both of which were discussed in relation to the rescue narrative in the previous chapter, these stepmothers demonstrate that they do manage to provide space for all, but with difficulty and sacrifice.

*Extract 3. Interview with Participant 13*

P13. .... so we moved in together we had to get find somewhere with at least four bedrooms which was quite a struggle so I took on a big loan. [S. Yeah.]

P13. and I took on a bit of a loan on top of the mortgage as well but so the two, his oldest two boys had to share a room. [his daughter] had a room and [my son] had a room.

*Extract 4. Post by W1*

I felt that the only escape for him was to offer and discuss the possibility of him moving in with me. I have a small 2 bed house not far away. Their plan all along was to go their separate ways and have total joint (50/50) custody of their son. I therefore knew that this offer would involve me clearing out my small study and turning it into a bedroom for his son to stay every other week.

In these extracts physical space is provided, albeit at a cost to the stepmother, who thus takes up a position of sacrifice. Such sacrifice seems to draw on a discourse in which good mothers are constructed as selfless. However, for some couples the provision of adequate space for all is just not possible because of financial constraints as the following extract demonstrates.

*Extract 5. Post by W12*

For example, when he moved into my flat he assured me it would just be for a short time and then we would club together and buy a bigger place suitable for the kids too. I had shown concerns from the start about how

practical it would be having them sleep in the lounge but again he reassured me it was only in the short term.

Then further down the line he confessed that he was up to his eyes in debt and didn't even have any credit rating. Now two years later we are in the same position.

Here the stepmother shows her awareness of the needs of children when she says that they would 'buy a bigger place suitable for the kids', reflecting parenting discourses that prioritise the children's needs and, as in the previous extracts, an acceptance, as common sense, of the idea that space and particularly a bedroom of one's own is an important need for children. This, of course, is highly culturally specific, sharing space, including sleeping space, has been a common arrangement historically and remains usual in many cultures but modern western individualistic notions that emphasise independence, result in a practice of moving children into their own bedrooms early in infancy (Morelli, Rogoff, Oppenheim & Goldsmith, 1992). The participant in the last extract also distances herself from failing in this aspiration to provide sufficient space, by making it clear that, despite her concerns, it is not her but her partner, the father of the children, who has failed to provide adequately for them. She occupies a responsible, adult position but he is constructed as less responsible and less morally admirable in getting himself into debt, in failing to be honest about his financial position and thus in failing his children. These data were collected before the introduction in the UK of the size criteria into Housing Benefit for social housing tenants, the so-called 'bedroom tax' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012) but as Philip (2014) notes this legislation has clear implications, both practical and emotional, for stepfamilies

who are co-parenting across households. This is because where parents are separated only one designated parent is allowed a bedroom for the children's use, even when shared parenting has been agreed. This, therefore, creates another potential obstacle, particularly for poorer families attempting to provide sufficient space for everyone in a situation that is often already very difficult. Yet, as these data demonstrate this is an aspiration for many.

#### *5.22. Timing the move*

There is also a frequently raised issue of the timing of moving in together. As discussed earlier in relation to extract two, where the participant discusses her own experiences as a teenager of moving in with a stepfather and step-siblings, there is a view here that getting together should be done gradually for the sake of the children. Indeed in extract one participant four noted that by discussing their planned marriage and house move with the children her stepsons had 'just gradually got used to being told what was going to happen'. A similar understanding is demonstrated in the next extract where participant twelve is talking about the issues she had with her then teenage stepdaughter's behaviour.

#### *Extract 6. Interview with Participant 12*

P12. But we did, everything has been fine between [my partner] and I but probably about nine months into our relationship we really came to grief over [my stepdaughter] really, really very nearly you know er

S. ended it?

P12. ended it because you know I think again it was about her behaviour I think it must have been my birthday and we'd had loads of people round and



S. were you actually living together by then?

P12. No, no because you know that was their home and we're nine months into our relationship it was too early for [my stepdaughter] there was no way I was ever going to live with her. [S. No.]

P12. No way. I just knew and [my partner] knew and she didn't want to.

Here 'their home' is something that the stepmother is not a part of and the timing of moving in together is important and subject to rules (albeit unspoken ones) so that nine months is 'too early'. Whilst the stepmother here is open about her difficulties with her stepdaughter's behaviour, and thus of her preference not to share a home with her, the decision not to move in together at that point in the relationship is largely framed as a responsible parenting decision in that it was 'too early for [my stepdaughter]' and that the partner supports the stepmother's view that the daughter doesn't want her stepmother to move in.

The following extract also carries the implication that there are unspoken rules about the timing of moving in together when participant ten says that she did this 'precipitately' in a previous relationship, a relationship that had ended some years previously before she became a stepmother again in her current marriage .

However, in this extract the stepmother suggests that the timing was too quick, not because it was wrong for the children, but because she had not really understood her own needs. This then forms part of an explanation, even a justification, of why her previous relationship ended, and perhaps again this hints at the tension between a new romance and the care of children as discussed in relation to extract two.

*Extract 7. Interview with Participant 10*

P10. And I went very precipitately into that relationship thinking that it was the right thing that I wanted to do but I really should have known a good deal better than that because I did know that I'd never wanted to have children myself and I did know that there were three children attached to that relationship and I did know that they all lived with [my ex-partner] so by going to live with [my ex-partner] I would be living with the kids as well.

In this the stepmother offers the information that she never wanted to have children as if this were an entirely unproblematic position to occupy, however, such a stance conflicts with what Reynolds and Taylor (2005) call 'the dominant coupledness narrative' in which a normative life-course, particularly for women, proceeds through stages associated with the heterosexual (and I would add, nuclear) family. These stages include, love, marriage and parenthood and women who do not follow this trajectory have to account for not having (or wanting) children just as Reynolds and Taylor (2005) suggest that they have to account for being single. However in the account offered by this participant she ascribes the problem (which is unstated at this point but which I take to be the fact that the relationship eventually ended), not to her never wanting children but to her lack of self-knowledge. This seems to draw on a psychological discourse of self-knowledge linking to a reflexive project to construct an identity, a project that is required of a contemporary or neo-liberal subject (Rose, 1996). However, this interpretation seems to conflict with her care and concern for the children. Such concern was expressed throughout the interview. In addition, as is seen in the following extract,

it also conflicts with her later explanation of how the relationship with her ex-partner did in fact end.

*Extract 8. Interview with Participant 10*

P10. really um....and um I you know I enjoyed a good relationship with them, challenging you know when [my stepdaughter] got a bit older and, er, I didn't expect but generally speaking they were quite good kids and and I like them a lot you know. [S. Yeah.]

P10. I grew to be very, very, very fond of them. [S. Yeah.]

P10.. So when [my ex-partner] called time on that relationship that meant I felt as if I was losing the kids....

This indicates a quite maternal feeling for these children which is somewhat in conflict with her self-identity evidenced in extract seven as someone who never wanted children and who should not therefore have moved in with a man who had three children with whom she would have to share a home. This participant is now married to a man who also has children but they are older and live with their mother although they do visit. There is a suggestion in extract seven that the earlier relationship could not succeed because she shouldn't have 'lived with the kids'. This may also, therefore, act as a justification for entering her current relationship where living with the children was not a requirement. The conflict evident in this account perhaps highlights the trouble inherent, for a woman, in taking up an identity of being 'childless by choice' particularly if she then 'chooses' to become a stepmother.

### *5.23. Household tasks – taking care of the home*

As Germaine Greer (1999) famously said, for women, ‘having it all’ has meant having all the work, what has been termed the ‘double shift’ after Hochschild’s book ‘The Second Shift’ (1989). This has made housework a topic of continuing interest to feminist researchers with many noting the slowness of progress towards equality (e.g. Lyonette, 2015; Segal 1990; Sullivan, 2000). Some suggest that there has been change (e.g. Sullivan, 2000) but it continues to be true that most women in the west undertake paid work whilst continuing to have responsibility for the majority of household tasks (Dixon & Wetherell, 2004; Lyonette, 2015; Petrassi, 2012; Yarwood & Locke, 2015) giving a sense of a ‘revolution stalled’ (Dixon & Wetherell, 2004: 167). Since many household jobs are generated by the children and since older children may be required to undertake some domestic chores, issues of responsibility for these may be especially pertinent in stepfamilies. Here it might be expected that the biological parent has greater responsibility for any ‘work’ related to their children, or at least that gendered norms in this regard may not be so easily invoked without discussion or consideration. Indeed, in my initial thematic analysis, issues that I later decided to discuss here were subsumed under topics such as ‘stepchildren - difficult behaviour’ and ‘How father handles children’. Inevitably, then, housework can often be linked with issues of parenting as we see in the following extracts.

#### *Extract 9. Interview with Participant 13*

P13. but if I do go shopping with [my husband] then I’ll always buy bits and pieces for [my son] but he [her husband] just buys for me and him and I under.. I kind of understand where he’s coming from um because [my son]

is working and doesn't actually pay and there's always these rows because [my son] is lazy he doesn't do anything and I say ..... I said 'it's no different from when your family were here' 'Oh yes they had to do this, they had to do' I said 'you forget I lived with you for a long while' I said 'and no they didn't, especially the boys. You know [your daughter] was supposed to get her pocket money she was supposed to run the Hoover round every Saturday or Sunday but there was always, quite often some excuse' but and he'd still give her her pocket money every week.

*Extract 10. Interview with Participant 11*

P11. Er um and so it sort of I'd sort of go into his house where she [her stepdaughter] would just leave everywhere in the most almighty mess and muddle and [my partner] just seemed to think that was okay. And one time, they lived next door to a supermarket where she worked, and some nights she'd finish work in Sainsbury's and she'd walk home and she'd say to [her father] 'Oh can you walk round to Sainsbury's and get me something for my tea now?' and I'd say 'Why didn't you buy yourself something while you were in there?' 'Oh well' she said 'I give dad board so I suspect he should be getting my tea' there'd be all these really weird things that I just thought well that's just not acceptable.

In both of these accounts it is (adult) children who are positioned as 'lazy' or failing to undertake household chores and both extracts also draw on a discourse of fairness. However, rather than this being fairness in terms of the division of domestic tasks between the couple, this is again related to the children, although in both accounts it is made clear that there are differences of opinion between the two partners. It seems then that the underlying discourse here is not related to housework but to parenting.

Extract nine is from an interview with a stepmother who is part of a complex stepfamily where both partners brought children from previous relationships into the current marriage; her son is considerably younger than her husband's children who have now all left home. In this extract there is a comparison being made between her biological son and her stepchildren. The participant begins to say that she understands her husband's attitude to her son but corrects herself to indicate a more restricted understanding (I under...I kind of understand where he's coming from). This, together with the talk that follows suggesting that her stepchildren also failed to undertake household tasks when they lived at home, demonstrates her acknowledgement of all the children as equally lazy. This offers an acceptance of laziness as somewhat inevitable in teenagers and makes it clear that she is not unfairly favouring her son by buying him 'bits and pieces' since her husband effectively did the same with his own children (e.g. by giving his daughter pocket money even when she had not performed her agreed household tasks). I note that the references to money here seem to demonstrate a greater willingness of both parents to spend money on biological children rather than stepchildren. This has echoes of some evolutionary arguments (e.g. Case, Lin & McLanahan, 2001) and raises interesting questions about the symbolism of money. However, these are big topics which cannot be explored here for reasons of space. In extract ten the stepmother has no biological children so there is no comparison between children and rather than a suggestion that the behaviour discussed is common in teenagers, there is a construction of the stepdaughter's behaviour as both unusual (weird) and unacceptable. Despite these differences in the two extracts, both position the

stepmother as fair and reasonable with their partners as lacking in understanding of normal or acceptable behaviour in their children.

Both extract nine and extract ten demonstrate a concern with fairness, a concept that has been important in researching gendered divisions in domestic labour and has been drawn on in explaining the slow progress towards equality discussed earlier. In particular Thompson's (1991) Distributive Justice Framework (DJF) has been influential and suggests that if women perceive an unequal distribution of tasks as nevertheless fair, perhaps because comparisons are made with other women rather than with their male partners, as several studies suggest that they do (e.g. Baxter, 2000), there is little impetus for change. Such an approach can be critiqued on feminist grounds since it risks blaming women for their own 'enslavement. This is also true for research on the DJF that has drawn on the alternative idea that differences in participation in housework are based on the different goals and values held by women and men (Dixon & Wetherell, 2004). Research on the DJF has tended to have a conventional individual psychological focus but as Dixon and Wetherell (2004) suggest it is compatible with a more discursive exploration such as the approach taken in the present work. It could, therefore, usefully be used to explore the ways that new discursive negotiations are required when there are significant changes in domestic life (such as the formation of a stepfamily). I am therefore drawing on ideas from the DJF, particularly attending to the way that notions of justice and fairness are used in these data.

With this in mind I turn to extract eleven where this participant, although using the present tense, is talking about her stepsons when they were teenagers (both are now adults and have left home).

*Extract 11. Interview with Participant 4*

P4. .... I find it very difficult to get used to the mess they live in.

S. Right

P4. Their bedrooms are a mess I just I've now decided I'm dealing with the rest of the house, shut their rooms, don't worry about it, they even admit themselves now they're pigsties, they're awful and now I used to they just collect all the washing, there was always an issue about washing. I'd say 'have you got any washing' 'No, no' they just couldn't be bothered to look it out and then they'd give you a pile of it.

Again we see teenagers constructed as both messy and as failing to do the domestic tasks that they should (giving her the washing on time and keeping their rooms tidy). However, her husband is not mentioned in respect of this, the stepmother suggests that she deals with the problem by ignoring it (shut their rooms) effectively leaving the boys to take responsibility for clearing up their own mess or deal with the consequences of living with it. She does not suggest that she either complains to her husband or asks him to deal with the mess made by his children. Although this seems to be an unquestioning acceptance of a gendered role, there is nothing in this talk to show how the couple may have negotiated their domestic arrangements or whether this is a source of contention between them. However, in the following extract posted on the web forum we see a clear linking of domestic tasks to responsibility for the child.



*Extract 12. Post by: W4*

One of my pet hates: that fanny I'm married to not rinsing the bubbles out of the bath after his child has been in it. He just leaves them to dry in leaving that vile scum at the bottom of the bath that I then have to scrub (because of course in 5 years of living together that c\*nt has never once cleaned a bathroom!). I've said time and time again to rinse the bubbles out as it creates extra work for me if he doesn't. I just went to the loo and guess what, of course f\*cking bath full of bubbles. It took me 20 minutes to rinse them out! ARRRGGHHHH!! RAGE! >:( >:( >:( >:(

In extract twelve there is a strong sense of injustice since he (her husband) should be responsible for 'his child' (and their mess) but also a very strongly expressed irritation with her husband, not just because he doesn't clean the bath after his child has bathed but because he has never cleaned the bathroom in the five years that they have been together. It is clear that this is an ongoing source of contention and yet, despite considering it unfair, the stepmother does undertake the task. It is also notable that the two epithets used to describe her husband are highly gendered since they are both terms for parts of female anatomy. This usage offers a construction of the husband as lacking just as Irigaray (1985) defines masculinity as a condition of lack, vulnerability and weakness. The next two extracts are responses to the previous post and this highlights the way that the web forum can function to offer referential comparisons (Major, 1993), that is women can compare their situation (in respect of the division of household labour) not with their partner but with other women in a similar situations and this, as discussed earlier, is suggested by the DJF, to be more likely to lead to an acceptance of

inequality as nevertheless fair.

*Extract 13. Post by W81*

Personally I'd be telling your SD [step-daughter] and/or OH [other half] to tidy it up.

Sometimes I tidy up after SS [stepson], sometimes I don't, depends on my mood. He needs to learn to clean up after himself and if you don't tell them they won't learn.

*Extract 14. Post by W34*

I agree with [W81]. It depends what mood I'm in, but mostly I will clean up because I know full well that OH [other half] won't! But sometimes I ask SS [stepson] to as well. I kind of see it as a given that things will get messy when there's a kid around, that's just what happens, so I've never really cared that much. However if SS [stepson] goes out of his way to make a mess deliberately, then there's no way I'm going to clear it up!

These, perhaps, express some ambivalence with decisions about whether to clear up after a stepchild dependent on the stepmother's mood or on a judgement about whether the mess was made deliberately or is just part of the mess that is framed as inevitable with children. Both of these extracts also draw on the idea of fostering independence in children as a task of responsible parenting. This is quite explicitly stated in extract thirteen as 'he needs to learn to clean up after himself and if you don't tell them they won't learn'; in extract fourteen a similar idea is implied in the last sentence. Extract fourteen also contains a potential contradiction in that the participant says 'mostly I will clean up because I know full well that OH [other

half] won't! ', this suggests that she is more concerned with cleaning than her partner and would be unable to tolerate leaving the mess. However, she later says that 'things will get messy when there's a kid around.... so I've never really cared that much' and also indicates that in the appropriate circumstances she will leave her stepson to clear up his own mess. In this way she positions herself as someone who is not excessively concerned about cleaning or tidiness challenging the stereotype of the house-proud woman and claims that women are more concerned about cleanliness than men. There is a very similar construction in the next extract where we also see a positioning of 'not particularly house-proud' which acts to emphasise just how dirty the kitchen windows are, dirty enough to cause comment from someone who is 'not particularly house-proud'. Just as in the previous extracts this is a gendered construction in that only a woman needs to make a claim not to be house-proud and the term bachelor pad is highly gendered providing a shorthand term for a home which is untidy and uncared for. This is further reinforced by the participant's reporting of her husband's reply that he doesn't think he has ever cleaned them (the windows).

*Extract 15. Interview with Participant 13*

P13. Even little things I can remember before we moved in together and I was staying at [my husband's] home with them for the weekend and it was just like a bachelor pad you know and I'm not particularly house-proud but I said to him 'you can hardly see out of those kitchen windows' and he says 'I don't think I've ever cleaned them'.

In the next extract Participant four is talking about the reaction of her own daughter, aged seventeen, to her initial involvement with the man who is now her husband.

*Extract 16. Interview with Participant 4*

P4. Yeah and she didn't really perhaps like the fact that I was, I don't know I don't know what that was about so I used to come home having helped [my husband] clear up in his kitchen and sat there while he did all the jobs, while he did his washing, he was always washing at the weekends as well, always on a Friday night come home from the pub he'd put the washing on it was really romantic.

S. Yes it sounds a dream [laughs]

P4. I told him that, he still doesn't understand what was wrong and then he'd do all the stuff at the weekend so I started helping him, I'd go home and I'd have to do the same in my house

S. Yeah nice double dose of domestic chores

In this extract a romantic narrative is framed as incompatible with the domestic and the mundane suggesting an inevitable problem for adults with children when they are in the process of forming a new relationship. However, this is narrated with humour as demonstrated by her ironic juxtaposition of the terms 'put the washing on' and 'it was really romantic' and I responded with laughter. It is clear that although she recognises the issue and effectively ascribes it to her husband being unromantic in that 'he still doesn't understand'; it has not actually been problem in their relationship. For some women, this might invoke concerns about not being 'number one', as discussed in chapter five, but here it is unproblematic for her and as she says it was her daughter who saw this enactment of courtship as wrong. This may hint at the specifics of this understanding of romance as

appropriate only for the young and unencumbered. Of course, she is talking retrospectively here, so it is quite possible that this was more troubling at the time, but her marriage has lasted and as Gabb and Fink (2015) found it is not the grand gestures or the obvious romance but the little things, the everyday, that are important in ensuring that love and relationships endure. Thinking back over this participant's whole narrative I note also her discussion of her mother's behaviour (see extract two) when she had started a new relationship at a time when the participant was in her teens (just as the participant's own children were when she began her relationship with her current husband). She described her mother as having 'stars in her eyes' making love blind, and implies that her mother's self-absorption and immersion in her romance resulted in a failure to fully consider the needs of the children. Drawing on this personal narrative she distances herself from such an interpretation of romance which again serves to position her as different from her mother in that she is a realist with a love that is mature enough to survive without the trappings of young love and without neglecting the needs of the children. This does, however, leave her with a double dose of chores and no suggestion that her husband is similarly encumbered.

### ***5.3. Home as an emotional or relational space***

#### ***5.3.1. Invasion***

Although my focus so far has been on talk of physical space it is clear that this cannot easily be disentangled from the emotional and relational connotations of 'making space' for everyone. Nor is it entirely separate from the emotional impact

of sharing space with others. For stepmothers in this study there is often the suggestion that, even when the physical space is sufficient, they may feel that their space is invaded. For example in extract seventeen participant four has been explaining how difficult she has found it to tolerate the noisy and boisterous behaviour of her stepsons (having been used to daughters who she told me were much quieter) and she points out that although they do have space for her to 'get away' she still enjoys time alone in the house.

*Extract 17. Interview with Participant 4*

P4. But they're easier for us because we've got the space.

S. Yes

P4. They can go to a different room, if we were in a smaller house where would you go to get away?

*And a little later in the interview*

P4.... I quite like an evening; I like the house to myself without them here.

Similarly in the following extract this participant expresses a wish to have her home to herself. The idea of invasion is very evident in this as the stepmother explains, the flat was her home and her husband and stepson have moved in so that her space has become a shared space. This extract is part of a post by this stepmother soon after her stepson has stopped living with his mother and come to live with them full time, perhaps an indication of the particular stresses at times of transition.

*Extract 18. Post by: W82*

I'd be more than happy for SS [stepson] and DH [darling husband] to shove off one weekend for a bit of boys time, I'd enjoy having my flat to myself

again! I think one reason I really struggle is this used to be MY space, and they've moved in with me.

In the following extract the stepmother is not wishing for the whole house to herself, just for one room to be 'stepson free'. This reflects the concept of home as a private space to be shared only with those one is intimate with and the wish for a childfree bedroom may relate to the bedroom as a particularly intimate space for the couple again showing a tension between romance and stepfamily life. There is also a narrative here of the father as responsible for the undesired behaviour of his son and, just as in chapter four, as incapable of (or unwilling to) discipline him.

*Extract 19. Post by W5*

How damn hard is it to understand that I do NOT want SS [stepson] running in and out of MY bedroom. It's bad enough we all have to share the bathroom. I deserve to have one room be SS [stepson] free! He knows he's not supposed to go in my room. He does it anyway and then has the nerve to tell me he's done it. His idiot father says he's just challenging me, well then punish him!!! I'm sick of having no privacy in my own damn house >:(

The next extract also draws on issues of parenting but here it is the stepson's mother who is held responsible for his behaviour, as mothers so often are held responsible for their children's behaviour (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991), indeed the father is notable by his absence from this narrative (just as I noted in chapter one that fathers are often absent in fairy tales). Here we also have a direct reference to identity with the phrase 'who am I in my own home?' This encapsulates the idea of home as a place where one should be able to be oneself and where one should be acknowledged and respected. That the stepmother does not receive this respect

from her stepson is evidenced by her graphic description of his behaviour and the use of capital letters to emphasise his worst excesses and the way that she is ignored. There is also a discourse here of anger as an emotion that must be vented in order to ensure good mental health with the web forum as an ideal location for this purpose.

*Extract 20. Post by W83*

Well SS [stepson] is here!!!!!! He sniffs and wipes his nose on his sleeve, so I tell him to get a tissue....IGNORES ME. I cook his favourite dinner and eats like a pig, I tell him NOT TO SHOVEL IT ALL IN IN ONE GO..... he storms away from the table, so I tell him to sit down until he's finished his mouth full..... he does eventually! Then we get the thrust out bottom chin all night..... who am I in my own home. I feel I get trodden on by him and his IT of a mother!

Sorry... but where else can I vent all this without going mad myself?

Thank you forum....

A response to that post is given in extract twenty-one and shows how the web forum acts to support stepmothers not just by offering a space in which feelings can be vented but also by providing an empathetic response. This post also demonstrates how feeling invaded can lead to a stepmother wanting, not the house to herself, but rather to get away. Home here is not just invaded but has become a place to avoid and anything but a refuge.

*Extract 21. Post by W12*

Ah, [W83] I know how you feel.

I haven't been on here for a while but it's not because things have got better, quite the opposite!

I was in your position last weekend (it's my childfree weekend this weekend



although OH [other half] is at work for the whole time) Last weekend though it all got a bit much for me and I sort of stormed out on the Sunday and managed to stay away until they'd gone home. I didn't even go back for the lunch OH [other half] had cooked. I ended up in the cinema on my own watching a film I didn't even want to see just to kill the time until they'd gone home. I'm already dreading the next time they come. So I really do sympathise with you. X

In extract seventeen the language is quite mild, this stepmother would 'quite like an evening to herself', but across the extracts from different participants there are increasing levels of emotion that are evident in increasingly strong language. In extract eighteen the stepmother says that she 'really struggles' and in extract nineteen it is 'damn hard' and the stepmother is 'sick of having no privacy in my own damn house', in extract twenty the participant has to 'vent' in order to avoid 'going mad' and in extract twenty one this participant 'stormed out' and is 'dreading the next time'.

Sometimes the issue is not the noise, disruption or behaviour of the children invading the space but rather it is more specifically the impact on the couple relationship. As we see in this extract from web participant twelve.

*Extract 22. Post by W12*

It actually seems that the more settled OH [Other Half] and I get and the happier I become with him the more I resent the skids [Stepkids] coming over and interrupting our cosy little love nest!!

This reflects a romantic narrative and just as we saw earlier that romance was framed as incompatible with the mundanity of household chores; here, as in

extract nineteen, it is shown as incompatible with the presence of children since it relies on the couple spending time alone in their 'love nest'. This is a potential conflict and source of trouble for a stepmother whose life story does not follow a normative romantic script.

The children are not the only potential invaders of the stepmother's home; the stepchildren's mother may also be experienced as invasive as participant seven explains in the next extract:

*Extract 23. Interview with Participant 7*

P7. . Yeah their mother coming back a lot, um and dropping them off and picking them up and also being on the premises..... er was very hard ..um and didn't make it easier.

Here the children's biological mother visited frequently and as the house had previously been her marital home and relationships between all the adults were described by the participant as polite and cordial, the ex-wife may have felt quite entitled to make regular visits. However, the stepmother describes these visits as hard, for her, and I would suggest that this regular reminder both of her husband's previous relationship and the fact that this had been his home with his ex-wife, contributes to a position for the stepmother in which her home feels invaded and in which she feels excluded. This illustrates the way that invasion and exclusion may not necessarily be opposites but may often be closely interwoven. It is to further examples of stepmothers as excluded (and sometimes invaded) that I now turn.

### 5.32. Exclusion

In both of the next two extracts there is talk of both invasion and exclusion.

#### *Extract 24. Post by W66*

I had to work quite hard with my xOH [Ex-other half] to get him to not do that and to try and make it into a family environment, not something where normal service was suspended when SD [stepdaughter] visited and I felt that my home turned into the SD [stepdaughter] show. That's hard, and it does make you feel like an outsider when you have no say in anything.

In extract twenty four the invasion (the stepdaughter show) is discussed as resulting from a failure (by her partner at the time) to provide a normal family atmosphere. Philip (2014) suggests that fathers interacting with their children after relationship breakdown want this normal family atmosphere in order to avoid being the 'entertainment dad' (Sunderland, 2000) and to ensure both emotional closeness and the maintenance of paternal authority. Here it is the stepmother who demonstrates that she has an understanding of the importance of the normal and routine which the child's father does not. This positions her as the responsible parent but there is an implication here that her advice is not heeded making her feel excluded, an outsider, since she has no control. As mentioned earlier, this powerlessness is a frequent complaint of stepmothers (Jones, 2004; Henry & McCue, 2009; Roper & Capdevila, 2010).

In extract twenty five there is also a sense of both invasion and exclusion with this participant highlighting the effect that this has on her mental health.

*Extract 25. Post by W83*

Well its the weekend of that person invading my house again, and for me to make myself busy with MY OWN THINGS again, as watching the Simpsons or You've been Framed over and over again has made me so crabby.

I made myself an emotional wreck last time he was here feeling left out, miserable and not even welcome in my own home. So I have given myself a talking to, and will try and busy myself away from the house, so hubbie and step son can bond in peace without me being around - how resentful does that make me feel..... loads and loads actually.

Again a responsible parenting discourse is used to support her response to feelings of invasion and exclusion but here this does not take the form of advising her husband instead it centres on the importance of fathering. The stepmother absents herself so that the father-son dyad are alone, offering the opportunity for their bond to be strengthened. Whereas in the previous extract the stepmother expresses little sense of agency, feeling that she lacks control, in extract twenty-five the participant is agentic in taking control of herself; she has 'given herself a talking to' and makes herself busy with her own things away from the house.

Extract twenty-six also features a stepmother focussing on the importance of the father-child bond.

*Extract 26. Interview with participant 4*

P4. No, so that was, felt quite normal but sometimes, I would, I did feel quite ostracised at times I know I did feel left out, very left out...yeh...but I would, on the other hand, I would, it sounds daft now to say I felt left out and yet I didn't want to do things with them because they were this close unit

Here it is apparent that closeness between father and child made her feel excluded, a feeling she expresses quite strongly as 'very left out' and as 'ostracised'. Yet there is still a sense of agency here, this is, at least in part, her decision.

The next two extracts again demonstrate the empathy and support that the web forum provides for stepmothers (extract twenty-eight is a response to extract twenty-seven). They also both use a similar terminology to describe their feelings of exclusion with web participant one saying that she feels like 'a stranger in my own home' and web participant fifty-seven saying that she has often felt like 'an alien in my own home'. Both are suggesting that they feel somehow 'othered' and the use of the term 'in my own home' highlights how difficult it is to feel like an outsider in the very space where you should feel comfortable and able to be yourself.

*Extract 27. Post by W1*

Post by: I get on fine with his son, but I must admit, I feel the strain sometimes. It has totally turned my life upside down, to the extent where I sometimes feel like a stranger in my own home, and I'm struggling to cope at times.

*Extract 28 Post by W57*

I took my OH [Other Half] in early on in our relationship and he moved into my one bedroom flat whilst still paying full mortgage and bills on the marital home that BM [Biological Mother] and 3 skids [stepkids] still lived in (and they were still married). I sacrificed a lot for my OH [Other Half] and the skids[stepkids], so I can sympathise, and have often felt like an alien in my own home - it has been a tough ride, and it will be for a long time. But being able to rant and seek support and advice on here has helped me feel sane again, as I have very few friends that understand my situation,

everyones attitude tends to be "well just end it then, I wouldn't take all that on!" ::).

Both of these extracts also contain references to the participant's own mental health. Web participant one says that she is struggling to cope and web participant fifty-seven credits the web forum with keeping her sane. At the end of extract twenty-eight the stepmother explains why the web forum is so important as a source of support; this is a space (unlike her home) where people understand the issues that stepmothers face whereas if she voices her problems with other friends they would simply tell her to end the relationship. This illustrates one of the troubles that stepmothers face. In a society where there is a strong discourse of individual rights and an understanding that relationships can be (easily) ended, stepmothers may feel that they have to justify their commitment to their partner and their family in the face of difficulties.

Two further extracts also feature feelings of exclusion and have an interesting link back to the earlier theme of housework.

*Extract 29. Post by W83*

Its Sunday morning, so time for hubbie and SS [Stepson]to set off to football - yes I could go, but I don't really enjoy it. But then I have this feeling of utter sorrow, as here I am again left on my own.... not even asked what I might be doing in the next few hours! I don't usually mind, but I was on my own all day yesterday as well, but busied myself with catching up on house stuff etc. What was I thinking offering for SS [Stepson]to come for an extra weekend as he wouldn't be here for two weeks due to his mother changing weekends again!

He hasn't shut up rabbiting on since bloody 7.30 this morning, I have to

keep getting up and going out of the room, but theres only so many times I can disappear upstairs and pretend to do things. I feel left out, resentful and can't wait till he goes home, but then he's back next weekend and I will have to do this all over again. Its not much fun, and of course I take it out on my hubbie.... and before you know it the weekends over and I've filled it with feelings of anger and resentment..... oh joy!!!!

In this there is a complicated account of agency. The stepmother could go to football with her husband and stepson but chooses not to as she doesn't enjoy it, but it is clear that she does not control when her stepson visits (his mother changing weekends again). She also demonstrates that her feelings are not being considered (by her husband) but despite this she continues to demonstrate concern and caring for her stepson by offering that he should come for an extra weekend. In this way she positions herself as a good and responsible mother in contrast with the stepson's biological mother who keeps 'changing weekends again'. The following extract is a response to this:

*Extract 30. Post by W33*

Yes I know what you mean, my house is never as clean as when he is here! I've even done some mending / sewing I've been meaning to do, but now they are back! I was watching the TV and he talked constantly through it (cos its not his choice), so I turned it off. No-one commented, and just took the buttons and put their own programme on... not even thinking to ask me if I had finished... and so it goes on. I'm back upstairs busying myself again with god knows what! He's 9, so only another 9 years to go of having every other weekend invaded! Now we just wait from instructions from his mother as to where and what time we drop him off. But I'll just dutifully cook dinner and grin and bear it!

Extract thirty also demonstrates that the stepmothers feelings are unconsidered and, as in extract twenty-nine, her response is to busy herself with household chores, perhaps suggesting one reason why gendered inequalities in domestic duties may not be challenged in stepmother families. Also, just as in the previous extract there is a suggestion that the stepson's biological mother is somewhat unreliable or inconsistent and that she has control of some aspects of the family's life but again the stepmother positions herself in contrast as the 'good mother' who will dutifully, and selflessly give up watching her television programmes and cook the dinner without complaint.

### *5.33. Not feeling like home*

I have considered ways in which stepmothers may describe feeling uncomfortable in their homes because they feel invaded, excluded or both. I want to turn now to a particular way in which a house may not feel like a home; the following extracts demonstrate the impact of living with objects that invoke reminders of a partner's past relationships.

#### *Extract 31. Interview with Participant 3*

P3. and rather rashly with the wisdom of hindsight I wouldn't quite do it in that order, we decided that we would buy a home together, but my house was smaller and just down the road here so I moved into his house out at Y [a village a few miles from the town we are in] and then after so long we bought the house that we've now bought, back in X [the town we are in] because that was the plan so we did that. That was a mistake on my part S. because?

P3. um .....I had to virtually move in to his ex, er late wife's house and it



caused some transition problems in getting some of it changed so that I wasn't living in a shrine

P3. and some tough times over that one um

S. You wanted to change things?

P3. I just wanted it to not be frozen in aspic, I mean I had to live with what [my stepson], bless him, called the wall of shame as you walked in the house, which were all the family photos.

Participant three had married a widower, although she begins to describe the house as his ex-wife's but quickly corrects herself, to late wife. The house is constructed almost as immutable 'a shrine', clearly a reference to the home as a container of objects related to the previous wife, and as 'frozen in aspic' in response to my suggestion that she may have wanted to change things. By tempering the idea of change in this way, suggesting not radical or significant change but just not completely unchanging, emphasises the reasonableness of her desire to make the house more her own. This is also demonstrated by the invocation of support from her stepson who offers a negative connotation of the very obvious display of family photographs. This perhaps, offers a defence against a potential accusation of insensitivity to the feelings of her husband and stepson. However, for her this was clearly difficult, it gave her some 'tough times' and moving in to his house is therefore categorized as a mistake.

Participant seven had also initially moved into what had been her husband's home with his ex-wife, but in this case he was divorced, not a widower. She had told me that moving from that house had been beneficial for her and for her relationship

with her stepchildren and I then wanted to explore how she had felt prior to moving from that original house.

*Extract 32. Interview with Participant 7*

S. Yeah. So how did that feel for you? Did that feel comfortable? Did that feel like home living there?

P7. In the first place? No I was very miserable, I was very miserable um because you know every bit of furniture we were sitting on and everything had been chosen well between them [her husband and his first wife]. [S. Yeah.]

P7. and the children obviously weren't aware of all of those things but I remember my friend C and her husband came from [X Country], were visiting England from [X Country] and came to see us for a few hours and [my stepson] was chatting to them in the kitchen and C said 'Oh this is a lovely kitchen' and he said 'Oh yes my mum, my mum designed this, designed everything chose all the colours you know chose everything and she designed the garage outside as well' and this went on for a little while and afterwards he must have left or something and C said 'I think there are some issues there'. Really he had nothing else to say except for just protecting, it was like a dog being territorial really. [S. Yeah.]

P7. and those things I found incredibly upsetting, probably more than maybe some other people might you know those things really did hurt me..you know

Here it is not just the many reminders of her husband's ex-wife but also of his previous relationship, the choosing of things 'between them' that make the stepmother miserable, again a reminder that she is not 'the first'. In addition, she is upset by the attitude of her stepson although she acknowledges that he is doing something almost inevitable, since she implies that this is innate behaviour ('like a dog') demonstrating a protective attitude towards his mother. This shows the

stepmother as understanding of her stepson's behaviour in contrast to the friend who frames his behaviour as less understandable with her comment about 'some issues' clearly locating these with the stepson. In this way, and with her later comment about being more hurt than 'some other people', the stepmother demonstrates her own sensitivity. In another extract from a little later in my interview with participant seven she, like participant three, talks about change.

*Extract 33. Interview with Participant 7.*

P7. and um but yeah you know very touchy about any alteration.

S. Change yeah

P7. You know, even photographs and things like that, I mean luckily it was quite a big house and I could get rid of quite a few things gradually and surreptitiously but you know to start with I had to tread quite carefully . [S. Laughs.]

P7. Um yeah that was fairly difficult and in addition when you take on new people into your life that you haven't had, new children that you haven't had since birth their eating habits and their habits and you know.

Again, photographs are singled out as objects which carry particular memories and associations. Here, as in the previous extract from this stepmother it is her (then teenage) stepchildren who are the focus of her concern, where she must 'tread quite carefully' in order to avoid upsetting them. For her this seemed to immediately link to talk of the difficulty of incorporating new people into your life since they have, not just different material objects, but different habits and ways of doing things. Together with the many constructions of stepmothers as isolated or excluded this is a reminder that people in stepfamilies must integrate 'micro-cultures' from previous relationships (Jacobson, 1995) but may not easily fit

together to form a 'homogenous' family, an argument that has been put forward by Wendy Martin (2009) to critique the use of the term 'blended family'.

#### *5.34. Appreciating Home*

Much of this chapter has put forward constructions of home that are rather negative for the stepmothers involved. However, there are a few examples in these data of more positive aspects of home.

##### *Extract 34. Interview with Participant 4*

P4.... we had the wedding in July and um because of my parents getting divorced, I wasn't quite, I've always been very aware of all this sort of er the issues between parents being divorced and stuff but I wanted a proper wedding because I didn't have a proper wedding the first time and this felt, it sounds a strange thing to say, this felt right. [S. Yeah.]

P4. It felt right someone once said to me 'does it feel like going home?' I just, it feels right.

In extract thirty-four home is used as an analogy. Here home is a place that feels right, a place to be 'at home', to be oneself.

Home may also be constructed by stepmothers as a place that is important for their stepchildren. In extract thirty-five Participant four is talking about her twenty-six year old stepson.

##### *Extract 35. Interview with P4*

P4.....then he went to work and live in Canada, various jobs in Canada for six months, very lonely, that was a lot of money and phone calls or skype anyway then he came back to us for a little while very miserable 'cos

another girlfriend had chucked him then he went to Vienna for a little while for six months, six months at a time then he came back and now he's in Australia he came back for a few months, each time he's come back though apart from the time, the last time he came back from Vienna he's grown up now he was really appreciative of home.

Having been away from home her stepson returns to be really appreciative and a similar appreciation perhaps underlies the feelings of the stepson discussed in the following extract. This stepmother explained that her adult stepson was now married but he was working abroad whilst his wife was working in the UK so his wife was currently living 'at home', in what had been her husband's bedroom. However, the stepmother explains that this makes him rather jealous of his wife because he misses his home and wishes that he could be there.

*Extract 36. Interview with P10*

P10. and so the room I think we now call A and C's room but a little er sibling rivalry with his wife around that one, it was actually very funny but he was actually stressed 'cos he went off to America, felt very homesick and his wife was living with us.

In both of these extracts there is pleasure for the stepmother in knowing that home is a place that her stepchildren like to be, perhaps a pride in making a home for them just as the following extract suggests that this stepmother is looking forward to making a home for her new family. The importance of having your own space is acknowledged in the response that follows in extract thirty eight.

*Extract 37. Post by W84*

I'm so excited to be moving out of our rented house and into our very own house, and to make it our home. I'm soo looking forward to christmas with

my little family. SD's lovely, and my OH's brilliant. ;D  
A very happy and excited W84.

*Extract 38. Post by W70*

Woop! Congrats - having your own space means so much. Hope you have a super Xmas in your new pad.

The final extract in this chapter also concerns a stepchild appreciating the home that his father and stepmother offer him, although he lives mostly with his mother so that his 'home' is somewhere he is reluctant to go since it involves leaving a place where he also feels at home. This may be a source of pride for the stepmother but it is also a source of concern as is evident from her suggestion that a 'normal' (nuclear) family would be easier for everyone.

*Extract 39. Interview with Participant 8*

P8. and he used to get upset when we'd take him home on a Sunday night.  
[S. Yes.]

P8. 'cos he didn't want to go home so um you know it's just I don't know I think life would be easier if you had the old fashioned normal you know family [S. Yeah.]

P8. Two point four children and a dog.

**5.4. Some reflexive comments**

As I write this in January 2016, the idea of romance as incompatible with domestic chores, or at least with chores as performed by men, is encapsulated in a very recent article published in a British tabloid newspaper (Hirschhorn & Hirschhorn, 2016) headlined 'You can never fancy a man who becomes a house husband: He

was the breadwinner and she raised the children. Then Ursula and her husband swapped roles. Her devastating verdict?’ In summary her devastating verdict is that she has lost respect for her husband and no longer finds him attractive. The article is illustrated with an image of the husband in a pinafore style apron emphasising how the ‘role swap’ has feminised him. That such discourse is still prevalent is indicative, to me, of the distance we still have to travel to achieve equality in the domestic arena.

Talk of home arose throughout both interviews and web forum data and whilst the same concerns were discussed and discourses drawn on, I do note that, as in the previous chapter, there are differences in the strength of the language used with the web forum data often being more emotive and strongly expressed. This is perhaps unsurprising in that the issues were current for the web forum participants whereas my interview participants were discussing events that had happened at different points in time. Additionally, the web forum provides some anonymity and is a protected space in which members expect their views to be understood and supported. This did not mean that interview participants were always dispassionate in this talk; memories of difficult times did evoke emotion, sometimes even tears. The way that the web forum can function as a source of support for stepmothers was very evident in these data and although my own stepmothering experience has not made home a source of particular difficulty for me, I did feel considerable empathy with all my participants as I recognised their distress in relation to a place that is so central to our identity.

### ***5.5. Chapter summary and some concluding remarks***

Home is a multidimensional concept that may be conflated with or related to house, family, haven (or refuge), self, gender and journeying. It may also be a repository of material objects that provide links to the past. It seemed likely that home would be a productive theme to explore in this work since, at their formation, stepfamilies or some family members will have to move home and may move between homes. It has also been suggested that home is a key issue in identity construction (e.g. Taylor, 2003), provides a crucial space for men to engage with their children after separation or divorce (Philip, 2014) and is highly gendered, often seen as private, domestic and female (Mallet, 2004). Nonetheless, home can be a site of oppression for women particularly as they continue to undertake a disproportionate share of domestic labour (Lyonette, 2015).

In this analysis I have considered home as both a physical and an emotional or relational space recognising that the two are always intertwined. This interconnection is apparent in stepmother's talk of making space for everyone. Clearly making physical space for someone in your home can reflect making space for them 'in your heart' and stepmothers in this study were frequently concerned to ensure that children's needs were prioritised and that everyone had sufficient space even where this involved some sacrifice for the stepmother. However, this was not always achievable and recent welfare changes in the UK are likely to make this difficult for more stepfamilies. A discourse of 'children's needs' was also often drawn on in discussing the timing of moving in together. Stepmothers often demonstrated an understanding of children as needing time to get used to new



arrangements, even as this could conflict with the couple's needs at an early stage of their romance. Such tensions between a romantic narrative and the demands of stepfamily life were a frequent theme through these data arising also in relation to the incompatibility of romance with domestic chores and the incursion of children into the couple's space thereby leaving stepmothers feeling invaded.

The idea of fairness is frequently drawn on in relation to household chores although often in respect of adult or teenage children unfairly (if not unexpectedly) shirking rather than as an issue between the couple. A discourse of men as uncaring about domestic tasks, or at least less caring than women, was sometimes offered as justification for undertaking jobs that might more fairly have been done by the male partner, although there was often resistance to a discourse of women as 'houseproud' or overly concerned with cleanliness. Housework was also referred to as a displacement activity, something that might be undertaken in order to occupy oneself or, perhaps, to territorialise, making the space one's own when feeling either invaded or excluded. This may suggest one reason why gendered inequalities in domestic duties may not be challenged in stepmother families.

In considering the affective meanings of home the women in this study expressed not only feelings of invasion but also of exclusion from the father-children unit. Sometimes this made stepmothers feel powerless, but at other times they demonstrated a sense of agency and drew on a responsible parenting discourse by choosing to absent themselves in order to give fathers and children time alone. Women also felt excluded when they moved into what had been the partner's marital home where they faced frequent reminders of his previous partner in the

form of photographs and other objects. Some even had the ex-wife invading their space by visiting in person. The most positive talk of home in these data was of home as somewhere that was appreciated by stepchildren, a clear source of pride and pleasure for stepmothers. However, for the women themselves home often had negative connotations as a place where they could feel invaded, imposed upon and excluded, sometimes struggling with their own identities and rarely, in fact, feeling 'at home'.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Mad, Bad and Dangerous to know (or why our stepchildren need us).**

#### ***6.1. Introduction***

Feminists have often embraced the idea of sisterhood, a mutually supportive alliance between women. From initial readings of the web forum data, it was apparent that the forum did indeed work very much in this way with stepmothers offering each other both emotional support and practical advice. However, it was also striking that this solidarity was sharply contrasted with the way that another group of women, the biological mothers of the stepchildren (i.e. the partner's ex and referred to hereafter simply as the biological mother and on the forum as the 'BM') were often positioned as 'other'. As discussed in chapter two, it may be difficult to know how a stepmother should refer to her stepchildren's mother who is also her partner's ex. Whilst Bernstein (1999) suggested 'ex-wife-in-law', this is a not a term used by any stepmother in the present study. Craig and Johnson (2011) found that twenty-two percent of the data in their study of an online web forum for stepmothers related to the biological mother and, in the present study, this was also a key a topic. It was prevalent right across the site; of the fourteen 'topic areas' twelve included threads where the biological mother was a significant part of the discussion and altogether there were fifty three threads with relevance to this topic of which only eleven were in the section devoted to the biological mother. The subject was also raised in a number of the interviews although here the biological mother was rarely so strongly 'othered'. This was a notable difference between the discourses of the forum and the interviews.

The apparent importance of the biological mother in the discourse of stepmothers may, in part, reflect a relatively recent phenomenon; the existence of children who have both a stepmother and a living mother. This is a situation that rarely arose until the latter part of the twentieth century when divorce or relationship breakdown, rather than death, became the most common precursor to stepfamily formation (Pryor, 2004). There are also suggestions from the research (Visser & Visser, 1988) that step-parenting is more difficult when the biological parent of the same gender remains very involved with the children<sup>3</sup> and this is more likely to be the case for mothers since although joint custody arrangements are increasing, it is still more common for children to live mainly with their mother after separation or divorce (Office for National Statistics, 2015). As a result, stepmothers may often have stepchildren who continue to have an active and involved mother. This relationship may therefore be at the heart of the difficulties which many researchers have suggested are faced by stepmothers. With the subject apparently so central to issues of gender within stepfamilies, so prevalent across the data and with the intriguing differences between the discourse on this topic on the web forum and that of the interviews, it was clear that this was an important area of focus for the analysis.

Within the wealth of data in this study, constructions of biological mothers were rarely positive (although as indicated earlier there are some differences between the data sources and some contrasting cases will be discussed in this analysis) and they were often described using pejorative adjectives such as 'nutter', 'loony',

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<sup>3</sup> This assumes a heterosexual couple and is not therefore universally relevant but does apply for most of the women in this study.

'nightmare', 'lazy', 'vile', 'evil', 'irresponsible' and 'manipulative'. It is these epithets, together with suggestions that biological mothers can be harmful to their children, which have informed my choice of title for this chapter. I am aware that the labels 'mad' and 'bad' are often juxtaposed and treated as binary. In the present study biological mothers are sometimes constructed as so mad or bad that their behaviour is potentially criminal, so it is interesting that one location for the consideration of mad and bad as alternative aetiologies is in the criminal justice system. Here, as Burns (1992) has argued, those convicted of criminal behaviour may be dichotomised as psychiatric patients (mad) or as offenders (bad). Burns (1992) also points out that, although contemporary criminology actually has a much more complex understanding than this suggests, the discourses of the penal and mental health systems are highly gendered so that female offenders are more likely to be classified as mad and male offenders as bad. This is reflected in Wilczynski's (1997) findings in relation to child killing by parents or parent substitutes (such as stepparents). In the cases she studied, women predominately used psychiatric pleas and were given psychiatric or non-custodial sentences whereas men mainly used 'normal' pleas and were given prison sentences. As Wilczynski's (1997) argues this reflects a construction of male offenders as 'normal' and 'bad' in contrast with a construction of female offenders as 'abnormal' and 'mad'. The participants in the present study may, therefore, reflect these wider societal discourses in their construction of other women as mad. However, they may be more unusual in applying the label 'bad' to women who are constructed as dangerous to their children.

I am not alone in reflecting on the impact of stepmothers positioning biological mothers as mad, bad and dangerous; one member who had recently joined the web forum posted some very reflexive thoughts about why such constructions were so frequent across the site. Her post was entitled 'BM's [Biological Mother's] attitude and how much are we imagining it?' This post received considerable feedback, becoming a lengthy thread which I will discuss further towards the end of this chapter as this highlights some issues around the ways in which the forum operates.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. These consider constructions of biological mothers first as mad and then as bad, and then as in some way dangerous to their children. The fourth section briefly considers the reflexive thread mentioned above together with my own reflexive comments. Also included in this final section is a consideration of some differences between the interview data and the web forum data as well as other contrasting cases. As in the previous chapters my focus in this analysis is on the way that stepmothers may take-up or resist, repair or construct particular identities within these discourses as they work at their 'troubled' identities (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). The chapter ends with a chapter summary and some concluding remarks.

## **6.2. *Mad***

The term 'mad' may be used to mean anger, insanity or simple foolishness as in the expression 'a mad idea' (Collins, 2000) and other expressions for madness are similarly variable in meaning and very dependent on context. Foucault (2001)

argued that the concept of madness developed from the portrayal of the mad as in possession of a sort of wisdom or truth during the Renaissance, to alignment with those seen as morally degenerate such as vagrants and prostitutes and then to a medicalised model of madness, as an illness to be treated. Similarly, these data offer a variety of implications for the use of terms for madness. Looking back to chapter four, I discussed stepmothers' constructions of their male partners as 'in need of rescue' or 'damaged', and these constructions sometimes related to a form of 'madness' framed as psychological distress or a mental health problem. For example, 'he ended up practically having a nervous breakdown' (chapter four, extract three) or 'I watched his emotional health deteriorate' (chapter four, extract six). In these examples the cause of the problem is generally attributed outside of the suffering individual. In fact, the ex-wife or ex-partner is often shown to be responsible and the stepmother has sympathy for her partner and attempts to rescue or care for him. Similarly, in chapter five, stepmothers sometimes used language relating to madness or psychological distress about themselves, often in relation to their feelings of being invaded or excluded in their own homes, for example 'I made myself an emotional wreck' (chapter five, extract twenty-five). They also suggested that the web forum was essential to them for good mental health using expressions such as: 'where else can I vent all this without going mad myself?' (chapter five, extract twenty), or 'being able to rant and seek support and advice on here has helped me feel sane again' (chapter five, extract twenty-eight). Just as with the constructions of men as in psychological distress in chapter four, these discussions of the stepmothers' own emotional difficulties are often

attributed to causes outside the individual such as the difficulty of their situation. However, whilst talk of their partners or of their own distress may demonstrate a sympathetic understanding of 'madness', this is less frequently applied when the subject of discussion is biological mothers. Extract one offers an example of two very different uses of the word 'crazy' in one post, juxtaposing its application to the stepmother herself with its use in reference to the biological mother.

*Extract 1. Post by: W86*

I have always said that I didn't want any children and so knowing that being a step mother would be hard I thought long and hard before committing to a relationship with OH [Other Half] (even though I was crazy about him from the moment I saw him ;-)

*After talking a little about what the two stepchildren are like she goes on to say:*

BM [Biological Mother] very much likes to get her own way and thinks nothing of canceling our weekends at the last minute but goes crazy if we try moving it with plenty of notice.

Here the stepmother uses the term crazy in relation to herself to emphasise just how much she loves her partner. Crazy here is not in any way pejorative, it draws on a discourse of 'being in love' as almost a state of madness, something that is not rational (but is nevertheless understandable and even desirable). However, this irrationality is tempered by her explanation of 'thinking long and hard before committing to a relationship' because of her concerns about becoming a stepmother. This is both a rational discourse and a moral one, demonstrating that, despite her powerful feelings for her partner, she does not act without thought but instead considers the implications of her actions carefully. This contrasts with her



use of the word crazy in relation to the biological mother where, the term relates more to anger but also implies an undesirable irrationality (she does things at the last minute), in contrast to the fair and rational approach of the stepmother and her partner who do things in a considered and reasonable way (with 'plenty of notice'). Thus, with both uses of the term crazy, the stepmother positions herself as rational in contrast with an irrational biological mother.

In the next two extracts the biological mother is shown to be mad using the term 'nutter'. Extract two is from a new member of the web forum and extract three is a response to that post.

*Extract 2. Post by: W85*

Hi Im hoping this site will help me with all my emotions and frustrations!  
Im 35 and have been with my partner for almost a year who is divorced  
with 3 kids!

Having never wanted children of my own(or so I thought) I now have found  
myself falling for a lovely man with a nutter ex wife. The kids are very  
indifferent towards me and spend my time just feeling treated like a useful  
person for treats and such.

Am i the only one who feels like an outsider? The ex is totally opposite to  
me in every way including how she brings up the kids

Im also jealous of the fact he has this bond with her forever and though I  
thought I didnt want children, this choice has been altogether taken away  
as my partner has had a vasectomy which he will not reverse as hes more  
than happy with 3 kids and the life he has with me now!

*Extract 3 Post by: W57*

Hi W85 and welcome to the forum ;D, you will find all the advice and  
support you need here! I know I did!

We have got some parallels too! I have taken on a now divorcee with nutter ex-wife causing lots of problems over the last two years!! He has three kids, a vasectomy and doesn't really want any more children, and life is interesting but I love him to bits.

In extract two there is no detail of why the ex-wife is described as a 'nutter', although this is hinted at in the way the children are described as indifferent towards their stepmother and yet also somewhat mercenary. Their behaviour is clearly attributed to their mother who is not bringing up the children in the way the stepmother would. Some of the 'trouble' for this stepmother is indicated in her uncertainty about wanting children of her own, a decision she thought she had made but which comes into question for her now that the choice is unavailable to her. The final paragraph of this extract may also indicate the benefit for the stepmother of constructing the ex-wife as a 'nutter'. This detracts from the bond that the stepmother acknowledges her partner will always have with his ex. The trouble for the stepmother of losing the choice about whether to have children, of having to deal with difficult and ungrateful stepchildren and of knowing that her partner's ex-wife will always have a bond with him are also countered by expressions of his worth to her and her worth to him. He is described as 'a lovely man' and the stepmother is not only the opposite of the 'nutter' ex-wife but she makes him 'more than happy', an expression which suggests that they are right for each other (in a way that the ex-wife was not), that he is 'the one' (Barker, 2013). Extract three also describes the ex-wife as a 'nutter' but this stepmother is more guarded about her troubles, simply hinting at difficulties with the phrase 'life is interesting'. Yet this clearly implies trouble since she uses the conjunction 'but' to

suggest that she loves him a great deal despite problems. Here, again, such a construction claims the partner as worth loving even though being with him may seem to be less than ideal for the stepmother. Such claims may anticipate a potential criticism for stepmothers if they complain about any aspect of their situation; they may fear being told to end the relationship if it causes any distress. This is demonstrated very clearly in the following extract where the stepmother explains that the forum is an important source of support for this very reason and actually helps her to feel sane:

*Extract 4. Post by: W57*

But being able to rant and seek support and advice on here has helped me feel sane again, as I have very few friends that understand my situation, everyones attitude tends to be "well just end it then, I wouldn't take all that on!" ::).

It may also be suggested that the biological mother's madness is not real but rather an act intended to provoke an ex-partner into some reaction as shown in extract five.

*Extract 5. Post by: W76*

Got to ask – could the ranting mad BM [Biological Mother] (that we know so well) be trying to get a reaction from DH [Darling Husband]??

Today on the way home from work I realised that often following periods of quiet we get unprovoked emails or comments which seem to be designed to get DH to speak with her. Today DH [Darling Husband] got a call from CSA [Child Support Agency]<sup>4</sup> saying that BM [Biological Mother] had told them

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<sup>4</sup> The Child Support Agency is a UK government agency which provides a service to determine and collect maintenance payments for children when parents have separated and cannot otherwise

that DH [Darling Husband] doesn't have SD [stepdaughter] for as many night as stated - complete rubbish, we even have a court order that lays it out however CSA [Child Support Agency] can't take the word of a dad can they!!!!

There is an implication here that the biological mother is unwilling to accept the ending of her relationship with her ex-partner and will therefore take any action to ensure some contact with him. This, of course, underlines a potential fear for stepmothers since, as we saw in the two preceding chapters, they are never 'the first' and there may always be concern that a previous intimate relationship is not really over. Also, here there may be a tension between a common 'break-up script', in which we expect that after a relationship ends the two individuals will never speak again (Barker, 2013), and the reality, for people with children, of needing to maintain contact in order to co-parent. I also note how in extract five the biological mother is shown to be untruthful with the stepmother drawing on legal evidence (a court order) to support the veracity of her own account. The topic of truth and lies is prominent in these data and will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Although, as I've suggested, constructions of biological mothers as 'mad' are often unsympathetic in contrast with other constructions of madness, stepmothers do sometimes demonstrate their efforts to understand the biological mothers' problems in a more sympathetic way. In a response to the post in extract four, this participant suggests a possible medical cause (albeit a highly gendered and potentially problematic one) for the biological mother's 'madness',

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agree an arrangement. Since 2014 it has made a charge for its services. Details are available from <https://www.gov.uk/child-maintenance>.

*Extract 6. Post by: W40*

could she suffer PMS [Premenstrual Syndrome]? i've noticed that our BM [Biological Mother] goes nuts every 4 weeks or so and OH [Other Half] confirms to me that her temper and outbursts were far far worse around the time of her period.

The following extract also suggests some sympathy for the biological mother and again offers a medical explanation of her problems.

*Extract 7. Post by: W77*

I felt more sorry for BM [Biological Mother] than angry with her; she was a tragic figure more than a bad one and sadly (for SD [stepdaughter]) she passed away this year. I resented the fact she paid \$10 a week maintaince and provided nothing else for SD [stepdaughter] but as I said it was more sad than bad. She was an alcoholic drug using bipolar agrophobic, she couldn't really help herself let alone SD [stepdaughter].

It would, of course, be difficult to take up an unsympathetic position when the biological mother is dead and yet it would also be difficult to construct her as other than tragic when mental illness and degeneracy have disrupted more positive constructions. However, the sympathy here is perhaps more for her stepdaughter than for the now deceased biological mother and in this way it demonstrates a 'mad' biological mother as potentially dangerous, or at least inadequate, for her child.

Extract eight is a response to the reflexive post discussed earlier entitled 'BM's attitude and how much are we imagining it? This extract also includes an apparently sympathetic construction of the biological mother as mad.

*Extract 8. Post by: W27*

I think the question you ask yourself here is very legitimate. And it shows that you are a sensitive and good person, b/c [because] otherwise you would not even ask this question, you'd just assume that the BM [Biological Mother] is the A-Hole in the story...

I do ask myself this question regularly. My BM [Biological Mother] is MENTAL... a lot of people would call her a bitch, I'd prefer to see her in the light of someone who is sick and who acts the way she does, because she cannot do it differently. She's a woman who does not know what love means.... never got any... and of course has only learned how to get on in life by stealing, disturbing, cheating, manipulating... b/c [because] she is so unsure of herself that she thinks if she were honest and nice to people, she'd never get what she wants...

Although the stepmother in this extract uses the term 'mental', an expression that seems to be very derogatory (especially when capitalised to give increased emphasis), she frames this as moderate. This is because she is suggesting a mental health problem that the biological mother cannot help whereas others, she suggests, would simply consider the woman to be bad ('a bitch'). In this way she positions herself as more moderate and reasonable than 'a lot of people'.

Interestingly, thinking back to the differentiation of 'mad' and 'bad' in the criminal justice system discussed earlier, framing the biological mother as 'mad' rather than 'bad' may also construct her as abnormal and thus, as 'other'. In addition this stepmother says that the original poster is 'a 'sensitive and good person' for posing the question (about why stepmothers on the forum so often have stepchildren whose mothers are 'mad' or 'bad' and if this might be imagined) and asserts that she also poses this question regularly, thus positioning herself as also sensitive and

good. The assertion that the biological mother in this case 'does not know what love means' and that she 'never got any [love]', indicates that the stepmother's partner never really loved his ex-partner, a validation of the stepmother's own position as her partner's 'one true love'. This again demonstrates the difficulty, for stepmothers, of never being the first partner since not being the first love is in tension with a romantic narrative of meeting our one true love and living happily ever after. In this extract, the apparently sympathetic attitude displayed in positioning the biological mother as mentally ill is rather undermined by the later descriptions of the biological mother as a dishonest, manipulative thief. In this we see how easily 'mad' can become 'bad' and it is to constructions of biological mothers as bad that I now turn.

### **6.3. *Bad***

As discussed previously, stepmothers may fear that the biological mother has not 'moved on' after breaking up with the children's father. In the next extract it is this failure to recover from breaking up with her previous partner that is cited as one source of what is bad in the biological mother. This is a woman who remains 'bitter and angry' even years later, making her 'nasty and vindictive'. Time has an important place in this discourse. There is an understanding that it does take time to recover from the ending of a relationship, perhaps even a long time, but not as long as it has actually taken in this instance. It is this failure to recover in an appropriate (if unspecified) length of time that is drawn on to justify the accusation that the biological mother is nasty and vindictive. Time is also just one of the

resources that the stepmother and her partner have therefore had to expend in order to deal with the biological mother's behaviour.

*Extract 9. Post by: W76*

When I started the journey of stepmum, many years ago, I was so positive (I wasn't even the cause of the breakup - she had affairs!) My thinking was - "Yes the BM [Biological Mother] is bitter & angry, often after a breakup it takes years to move on. Time was on our side, she wouldn't/couldn't stay angry for ever" Boy was I wrong despite years of placating her she is still a nasty vindictive woman.

We have spent so much time, money and energy trying to make things work and I'm just worn out by it - I want it to stop.

Additionally in this extract, the stepmother draws first on a common narrative of infidelity as the cause of relationship breakdown. It is taken for granted here that the biological mother's affairs are a justifiable cause of the relationship failing and that monogamy is therefore a requirement of relationship success, although neither of these assumptions is made explicit, nor are they universally agreed. This both positions the biological mother as responsible for the end of her relationship and demonstrates that she is 'bad' in that she is morally reprehensible in failing to be monogamous, and on more than one occasion. This was not a single mistake that could have been forgiven or accepted, she had 'affairs'. A further example of the biological mother being shown as responsible for the breakdown of her relationship due to infidelity is evident in extract ten.

*Extract 10. Post by: W53*

Personally as I knew there was a child involved and that some time had passed since the messy split between DH [Darling Husband] and BM



[Biological Mother] (she messed around on him), I didnt want to judge BM [Biological Mother] for what she had done as a teen as people change and grow as they get older. I didnt like what she had done to DH [Darling Husband], BUT I didnt dislike/hate BM [Biological Mother] either.

I stayed out of any dealings to do with BM [Biological Mother] and tried to think how she must feeling, smoothing things over when DH [Darling Husband] became fired up. We didnt have any issues between us (BM [Biological Mother] and I) as I didnt know her or even what to, for about a year and half, that was until she started to get personal and poisonous towards me when we were due to get married.

The concept of time is drawn on, again, here in emphasising that the stepmother was not involved in the breakdown of her partner's previous relationship as 'some time had passed'. This is also a narrative that positions the stepmother as reasonable, someone who doesn't judge and even attempts to empathise with the biological mother in trying to understand her feelings. However, this changes when the biological mother is shown to be 'bad' by being 'personal and poisonous'. That this behaviour begins when the stepmother and her partner are about to get married seems again to suggest that the biological mother has failed to recover from the breakdown of her own relationship.

Even when the biological mother's infidelity is not cited as the cause of the breakup, she may still be shown to be responsible as demonstrated in extract eleven.

*Extract 11. Post by: W11*

Her and OH [Other Half] had been seperated when we met, but hadn't yet done the divorce thing. Meeting me made OH [Other Half] speed it up but she was the one who kicked him out in the first place, so I definitely don't

feel any sense of victory over her. However, I am definitely the better woman - better for OH [Other Half] than she would ever have been - they are so badly suited it's untrue.

By saying that the biological mother was responsible for the breakdown of her own marriage the stepmother is able to occupy a more morally admirable position and avoid the troubling identity of 'the other woman'; the breakup was not her fault. The stepmother's lack of responsibility for the breakdown of her husband's previous marriage is evidenced in two ways in extract eleven. Firstly, it is made clear that the couple had already separated when she and her partner met and secondly, the ex-wife was responsible 'she was the one who kicked him out'. As a second wife or partner, an identification as 'the other woman' may often be feared as a very recognisable narrative of a marriage wrecker and a stealer of husbands. This may be particularly troublesome when the first wife has a child or children and the second wife is childless since it is not just a marriage that has been 'wrecked' but a family that has been broken. Perhaps it is unsurprising that many stepmothers in this research work hard at repairing the potentially difficult identity of 'the other woman'. Where the stepmother had been involved with her partner at the time that his previous relationship ended, this may be an even more troubling position and one that is even more difficult to repair, although discussion of it may often be avoided. One of my interview participants only mentioned her husband's ex-wife fairly briefly to complain about how she had delayed the financial settlement when the marriage ended. This stepmother had been involved with her husband while he was still married to his first wife. Although not a major

part of our discussion she referred to the ex-wife as 'Godzilla' and casting her as monstrous in this way might perhaps provide a justification for the end of that marriage for which the stepmother is not, therefore, to blame. Extract eleven does not overtly refer to the biological mother as 'bad' though it does claim that the stepmother is better, and specifically, that she is better for her partner. Just as discussed earlier and in previous chapters, an assertion that the couple were 'so badly suited' makes a claim that the biological mother was never 'the one' leaving this as a space to be occupied by the stepmother.

I mentioned earlier the frequent invocations of truth and lies in these data and another way in which biological mothers are frequently framed as 'bad' is in relation to their lack of truthfulness. The following extract was a response to a stepmother asking for advice after taking on her stepchildren on a full-time basis.

*Extract 12. Post by: W10*

I've been FT [Full-time] for 14 years W82 and it was really hard. Mainly because we had a lot of interference from BM [Biological Mother]. She gladly relinquished SS [Stepson] and SD [Stepdaughter] to us FT [Full-time] but told everyone around her that DH [Darling Husband] was going to go to court to get them from her which was utter bullshit.

The lie here relates to the biological mother apparently presenting her decision to allow her children to live with their father and stepmother as imposed by the courts rather than as a choice. My focus is usually on the work that stepmothers do on 'trouble' for their own identities, yet here I find that the biological mother's 'lie' is all too easily understandable in the context of dominant ideologies of mother-child bonds as sacrosanct and a judicial system in which mothers more usually

retain custody of their children after separation or divorce. Whatever the reasons for the decision about the children's residence, any mother living apart from her children may expect to be criticised or held to account for that situation (Hart, 2008) in a way that would never occur for a man in the same position. Indeed, one of my interview participants, whilst demonstrating a contrasting case example by generally acknowledging her stepson's mother as a good mother, did express incredulity that this woman had left her children (with their father) in order to move away to start a new relationship.

*Extract 13. Interview with P6*

P6. And I must impress that [my stepchildren's mother] has always been a good mother. [S. Oh yes.].

P6. I mean, I know it's bizarre to leave your children but she was never a bad mother.

In the following extract the biological mother is accused of lying about the ending of her marriage. Just as we saw in extracts ten and eleven there is much invested for the stepmother in demonstrating that she was not responsible for the breakdown of her partner's previous relationship.

*Extract 14. Post by: W51*

BM [Biological Mother] left OH [Other Half] for another man so, no, I don't feel any sense of victory over her as a woman because I didn't know either of them when they were together.

I tend to think the worst of any suggestion she makes because so far (three years) she has lied consistently and intricately, refused to tell her kids the real reason why the marriage ended whilst encouraging them to hold OH [Other Half] and I responsible for the divorce. Despite that it was five years

in between.

The post starts by saying that the biological mother had left her husband for another man, thus asserting that the stepmother was not involved in the relationship breakdown. This is then reinforced with the statement that the stepmother did not know either her current partner or his ex-wife at the time they were together. The implication of stating that the biological mother has 'lied consistently and intricately' is that her lies may have related to a number of issues but actually, the lie that is being 'exposed' here is that she did not tell her children that she left their father for another man, instead suggesting that their father and stepmother were responsible for the breakdown of her marriage. The stepmother then offers further evidence of her own lack of culpability in the marriage breakdown and of the biological mother's lack of truthfulness by referencing the time gap between the end of the marriage and the start of her own relationship. Thus, this short extract demonstrates that the stepmother was never 'the other woman' in several different ways, perhaps indicating just how important this claim may be to a stepmother's identity. Indeed, the stepmother here effectively positions herself as 'the wronged woman' since she has been damaged by the biological mother's lies. Taken together with the ways that biological mothers are 'othered' in these data, this then seems to invert the usual binary of 'wronged woman' (usually the first wife but here the second wife) and 'other woman' (usually the second wife or mistress but here the first wife). I also note that this post was in response to the reflexive post about stepmother's views of biological mothers previously mentioned. The location of this post may then help to explain

the intensity of the claim being made here and this is a point I will return to in my comments about that thread later in this chapter.

A concern for non-resident fathers and for stepmothers is the lack of control they may have, including the ability to decide when the children will spend time with them (Roper & Capdevila, 2010) and it is often the biological mother who exercises this control and who therefore occupies a very powerful position as we see in the next two extracts.

*Extract 15. Post by: W40*

I think for most of them its about control...they don't view the dad as an equal parent and they have a sense of ownership over the children that is misplaced.

The comment that the Dad is not viewed as an equal parent is interesting in light of the arguments made in chapter two that discourse around 'parenting' actually often just references mothering. In extract fifteen, such assumptions are implicitly challenged suggesting a belief in both parents as equally responsible for their children. The next extract, which also considers control, is a response to a post entitled 'Why can't OH [Other Half] see she is a liar? '

*Extract 16. Post by: W18*

I think that a lot of that stems from the dads not wanting to rock the boat, as for the most part, the kids remain with the mother and therefore she has a HUGE amount of control over what can and cannot happen.

If he decides to call the BM [Biological Mother] up on lying issues, then she might stop him seeing his son altogether so there's a lot of egg-shell treading that goes on, that wouldn't otherwise go on with other people.

Extract sixteen seems to be quite a considered post with the stepmother demonstrating an understanding of why the power differential might make it difficult for men to challenge their ex-partners if they do lie. Although this stepmother makes no overt statement to suggest that her own stepchildren's mother is a liar, this post does take for granted that biological mothers do lie and that, if challenged, they are unpredictable and might stop a father from seeing his children. This behaviour is explicitly contrasted with that of 'other people', where one would not need to be so cautious; perhaps suggesting that 'other people' are less erratic than biological mothers. This extract demonstrates another feature that is notable on the web forum, although participants often draw on their own experiences and talk specifically about the biological mother of their stepchildren, they also quite often generalise about the behaviour of biological mothers. For example:

*Extract 17. Post by: W28*

Unfortunately, it seems a lot of people here have had a lot of very negative experiences of the BMs [Biological Mothers].

*Extract 18. Post by: W56*

BM [Biological Mother] is the major source of my problems as a steppie. If she didn't exist or was a nice, normal, pleasant person I don't think I would have ever sought out this forum.

Extract nineteen is in response to a very new stepmother struggling with her feelings about her situation and here again there is a normalisation of a particular type of discourse about biological mothers.

*Extract 19. Post by: W61*

hey there newbie, welcome to the site. Your feelings sound completely normal. Don't underestimate the strain on a relationship of the fact that he is still married. That'll be tough unless the BM [Biological Mother] is a normal human bean (some of them are, we just have many members who are the other kind)...

In these examples there is a generalised construction of biological mothers either as responsible for the negative experiences of stepmothers or as abnormal. Such constructions marginalise and effectively constitute biological mothers as 'other' and, as we see in extract twenty, this also emphasises the ways in which they differ from stepmothers.

*Extract 20. Post by: W76*

Thanks again - This is such a sensible forum, why is it that SM [Stepmothers] are so much more balanced. I imagine if I posted on other sites with MUM in the name..DH [Darling Husband] would be labelled controlling!! Seems to be a response to everything, oh and that Mums are divine creatures who don't make mistakes.

Here biological mothers are directly compared with stepmothers and stepmothers are pronounced 'much more balanced'. As in the earlier discussion of biological mothers as mad, this suggests sanity versus insanity but also highlighted in this extract is the importance of the web forum as a source of support for stepmothers. The other site referred to here is Mumsnet, a parenting forum mainly used by (biological) mothers and which some, on this forum and outside it, have suggested is not friendly and supportive but sometimes hostile and bullying (Perry, 2011). Indeed, Pedersen and Smithson (2013) suggest that the Mumsnet discussion forum



is different to other mothering websites in the way that language is used, in its tendency towards the confrontational and opinionated and in tolerating aggression and swearing. They also found that the site focussed on entertainment rather than support, all attributes previously seen in male online behaviour. Here we see the ironic statement 'that mums are divine creatures who don't make mistakes', which this participant suggests is the overriding message on the Mumsnet forum. Clearly this references an idealised construction of mothers which, this irony implies, contrasts sharply with the views of stepmothers. It is also frequently challenged in these data. It is to such challenges to an ideology of mothers as perfect that I now turn as I consider ways in which biological mothers are sometimes framed as a danger, particularly to their children.

#### ***6.4. Dangerous***

In this analysis I have already argued that a number of binary oppositions are invoked in these data, such as demonstrating that the biological mother is unstable or irrational in contrast with a rational stepmother, or that the stepmother is 'the wronged woman' in contrast with a biological mother who becomes 'the other woman'. Such binaries are also very evident here where biological mothers are constructed as, at the very least inadequate or incompetent as parents, and, at worst, as a danger to their children with this often contrasted with the stepmother's capability as a parent or understanding of good parenting.

In these first examples the biological mother is shown to be a danger to her child due to her irrationality or mental instability. The first extract is in response to a question from another stepmother about why web participant eighty-two has her stepson living with her full-time.

*Extract 21. Post by: W82*

Long story short BM [Biological Mother] isn't exactly, um, stable? And the court ruled she was guilty of emotionally abusing SS [Stepson] plus a heavy duty case of PAS [Parental Alienation Syndrome]. So DH [Darling Husband] was awarded custody on the grounds of a more healthy home environment and that we would support BM [Biological Mother] still having a relationship with her son whereas she would have prevented DH [Darling Husband] ever seeing him again if she'd retained custody.

In this we see an accusation of emotional abuse and of an attempt to damage the child's relationship with his father. The validity of this account is underpinned by the invocation of the court ruling, this is not just the stepmother's view it has been legally sanctioned. PAS or Parental Alienation Syndrome (Gardner, 1992) is not medically recognised but was proposed as a disorder to describe a situation where one parent may turn a child against the other parent as part of a child custody dispute. The validity of this as a syndrome is highly contested with critics arguing that it is a normal part of growing up (Roseby, 1997), is oversimplistic about the causes of alienation and, most damningly, lacks a scientific basis (See Warshak, 2001 for a detailed discussion). This extract assumes the validity of PAS and takes for granted the importance, for a child, of maintaining a relationship with both parents. There is also a contrast here between the 'healthy home environment'

that the stepmother and her partner can offer and the abusive environment provided by the biological mother.

Extract twenty-two also relates to a stepchild, this time a stepdaughter, who has now moved in with her father and stepmother on a fulltime basis.

*Extract 22. Post by: W57*

Yeah it is scary that at 12 kids have to go through this, I am sure there is a rocky ride ahead as she in time realises that she misses the mother that she loves - the one who can sometimes be nice and kind to her and call her baby and give cuddles, just a shame that BM [Biological Mother] cannot be like that all the time, she can fly from one extreme to another so quickly (Bipolar? My OH [Other Half] is convinced of it!!).

This demonstrates a particular view of childhood that is central to understandings of what it means to be a good parent. Children in this account are innocent drawing on a construct of childhood that owes much to developmental psychology (Burman, 2008). In this, childhood is a specific phase of life that is free from responsibilities, except the responsibility to achieve developmental milestones, although as Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003) point out parents, or more often mothers, are actually held primarily responsible for the child's achievement of these. Childhood, then, contrasts with the responsibilities and moral accountability of adulthood and hence a twelve year old should 'not have to go through this'. It is interesting here that the stepmother refers to the potential duality of the child's feelings about her mother, whilst here this is attributed to the mother's possible mental illness, such duality also echoes more pervasive ideas about children's feelings for their mothers. Some of these have origins in

psychodynamic theory and, like many instances of Freudian constructs such as Ego, these have seeped into common parlance. Particularly pertinent here is the work of Melanie Klein who, building on Freud's earlier work, suggested a binary splitting in the paranoid-schizoid position in which mother is split into good breast (the loving and loved mother) and bad breast (the frustrating and hated mother) (Bott Spillius, Milton, Garvey, Couve, & Steiner, 2011). This binary also links to the wicked stepmother myth where the stepmother is wicked in contrast with a good mother (or fairy godmother in some tales). As Simone De Beauvoir (1972: p.228) writes 'In every country, legends and tales have also personified the cruel side of motherhood in the stepmother.' As this suggests and as discussed in chapters one and two, the wicked stepmother myth is pervasive, not only in traditional fairy tales, but also in many contemporary media portrayals, and several researchers have cited the stereotype as a significant source of stigma and an underlying cause of the difficulties faced by stepmothers (e.g. Salwen, 1990; Jones, 2004; Christian, 2005). As discussed in chapter two, Christian (2005) looked at how stepmothers used narratives in an online forum in order to deal with the stigma of the wicked stepmother myth. She found two main themes in her data: the biological mother as incompetent or mentally unstable and the stepmother as martyr. The current research lends support especially to the first of these findings, particularly within the web forum data but, on occasion, also in the interviews. For example, in the following extract we see the biological mother shown to be incompetent and the impact on the stepmother is so evident that she does not need to explain it to me. At the beginning of this extract the stepmother is talking about how the biological

mother would complain about the way the children were being cared for by their father and stepmother (with whom they lived all week).

*Extract 23. Interview with P9*

P9. What they were wearing and what they were being fed and you know what they weren't being fed although absolutely as a parent she was utterly irresponsible towards them you know the arrangement was that she was supposed to have time with them at the weekend and um excuse after excuse after excuse would be put forward. [S. Mm.].

P9. for her not having them at the weekend as in I haven't got any money for the gas meter I haven't got any quilts I haven't got any cereal er the man's coming to fix the television these were all genuine reasons that she would put forward on the Sunday afternoon or whenever it was that she was supposed to be having them [S. Yeah.]

P9. By which point of course they'd all be all excited and with their little bags packed and..

S. You were left to deal with it.

The stepmother defends her own care of the children with a vigorous account of the biological mother's lack of competence and responsibility. The biological mother is not just irresponsible, she is 'utterly irresponsible' and the multiple reasons that she gives for not having her children to visit are listed. There is also an appeal to truth again here; these were 'genuine reasons' and this perhaps emphasises how slender these reasons appear to be as justifications for the biological mother's inability to have her children with her, and it supports the stepmother's claim to veracity. The stepmother does not complain here about the impact on her, rather, her concern is with the impact of this disappointment on the children. Although I understood the effect that this must have had on her (and her

partner), her point demonstrates her own understanding of good parenting in contrast with the behaviour of the biological mother rather than suggesting that she is a martyr in having to deal with this. In general, although there are examples in these data of stepmothers feeling that their efforts are unappreciated, these are rarely juxtaposed with complaints about the biological mother. As discussed in relation to previous extracts, Christian (2005) found in her narrative analysis of a stepmothering web forum that users spoke of the biological mother (of their stepchildren) as 'incompetent or mentally unstable' in a binary opposition to 'stepmother as martyr'. However, the discursive interpretation that I am using here focusses more on the way that the dominant ideology of motherhood is drawn on to invert the usual binary of good mother and wicked stepmother. The following extract provides an example of a biological mother being shown to be 'wicked'. This is not just irresponsible parenting as shown in extract twenty-three with its suggestion of a degree of mental cruelty or, at least, a lack of consideration of the children's feelings. In extract twenty-four mental cruelty is more explicitly demonstrated.

*Extract 24. Post by: W50*

Last weekend SD [Stepdaughter] was worried that DH [Darling Husband] wouldn't be picking her up because it was getting dark. When DH [Darling Husband] asked her what mummy had said when she asked and asked where Daddy was, she said 'nothing' and must have watched her three year old daughter getting more and more worried and upset. Its hard to think good of someone who treats her child so cruelly.

This is a short post, quoted here in its entirety and it is not clear from this if the father was actually late to collect his daughter. Certainly there is no blame attributed to him in this extract and, of course, a three year old would be unable to tell the time. The post does frame the biological mother as both bad and cruel and the use of the word cruelly does seem to invoke the wicked stepmother myth; witches and stepmothers are wicked and cruel, mothers should not be (and neither would the stepmother). Saying that it is 'hard to think good of someone' who behaves in this way positions the stepmother as fair since the implication is that she is trying to think well of the biological mother but simply cannot in the face of this cruel behaviour. There are many examples of such mental cruelty by the biological mother and sometimes, also, suggestions of physical cruelty or abuse as we see in the next extract. This is part of a very long thread where the stepmother has explained that she and her husband are in the process of reorganising their work commitments in order to apply for custody of her stepdaughter (she currently lives with her mother but visits her father and stepmother). The biological mother has at times been unable to cope with her daughter but if the father and stepmother are unavailable to care for her at these times the father's sister (Auntie) steps in.

Extract 25. *Post by: W59*

But she admitted there last night she hit SD [Stepdaughter] last week, I didn't react due to wanting SD [Stepdaughter] outta there but we can't do anything at the moment until I change jobs which is the problem at the moment.

I reassured no promised SD [Stepdaughter] last night that while there is breathe in her daddys and my bodies she was going to no “school prison for naughty girls” or “into care” which her mother told her she was going! But she’s safe now with her Auntie and I get her to hug again tomorrow but see last night OH [Other Half] greeted me with a glass of wine and I crumbled how could she do that to her own child ??? ??? ???

This suggests that the biological mother is both physically and mentally abusive to her daughter with the stepmother and father coming to the rescue, trying to reassure the child and ensure her physical safety. The last sentence directly references a discourse of mothers as nurturing and caring for their children so that it is difficult for the stepmother to understand how a woman could do such things ‘to her own child’. The whole extract also explicitly positions the stepmother as caring deeply for her stepdaughter, in just the way that a [biological] mother should, that is, she will protect the child with every breath in her body.

A number of posts on the web forum suggest a form of abuse by biological mothers that seems almost akin to Munchausen’s syndrome by proxy, a psychiatric disorder first identified by Meadow (1977) in which a caregiver, usually a mother, induces illness in a child in order to gain attention for herself (Morrell & Scott Tilley, 2012). When web participant twenty-four says in a post that her stepchild has been diagnosed with asthma, although she sees no sign of it, several other stepmothers respond with similar stories. For example:

*Extract 26.Post by: W31*

Exactly the same here W24. SS [Stepson] is practically encouraged to be asthmatic by his Mum - it's ridiculous. I have never heard him cough or



wheeze or seen him short of breath in the 7 years I've known him. He plays football all the time. I have asthma and it's very mild most of the time. Occasionally - particularly when I have respiratory infections - it gets quite bad - and when I travel to hot, dry countries. SS [Stepson] never has the same symptoms as me ???

But when he goes to BMs [Biological Mother's] house all hell breaks loose. Suddenly he's insisting we go to the GP [General Practitioner] and get his inhalrs [*sic*] and send them to him etc etc. Total nonsense in my opinion. I reckon he may be allergic to cats (she has some).

Or his BM [Biological Mother]. I know I am. >:(

In this extract the stepmother suggests that the biological mother is actually encouraging the child to be asthmatic and she draws on her own experience as an asthma sufferer to add weight to her opinion on this matter. There might, of course, be many reasons why the child shows symptoms of asthma in one environment and not another, including, perhaps, the stepmother's own suggestion that he might be allergic to cats, yet the stepmother's first thought is that this is the fault of the biological mother. Such positionings of the biological mother as a danger to her child with the corollary of the stepmother as a better carer for the child, not only invert the usual good mother and wicked stepmother binary but may, in particular, reference evolutionary psychological arguments that suggest that stepparents may be a danger to their children (e.g. Daly & Wilson, 1985; Harris, Hilton, Rice & Eke, 2007; Kaplan & VanDuser, 1999; Popenoe, 1993) and perhaps reflect media reports of stepparents as abusive (e.g. Thomas, 2014). It is hardly surprising that these are identities that stepmothers wish to resist. An awareness of stepparents as potentially dangerous for their stepchildren is also

evident in constructions of biological mothers as posing an extreme danger to their children through their choice of partner (i.e. a stepfather) as in the following extract in a post entitled 'biased courts'.

*Extract 27. Post by: W78*

Me and OH [Other Half] are at a loss as to why he hasn't got full custody (not that I'd want him to, but however), and this is largely due to BM [Biological Mother] objecting to the idea, despite admitting to MIL [Mother-in-law] that she doesn't want her kids back full-time "just yet".

She is living with a guy who has been charged with child abuse twice, although he was never convicted, and despite this fact and the fact that she left OH [Other Half] for him and didn't have any contact with her kids for over a year, the courts still won't favour OH [Other Half] over her during custody hearings, hence the kids (and everyone else) are stuck in limbo.

Just as we saw in a number of earlier extracts, this extract demonstrates that the stepmother was not 'the other woman', and it goes further in condemning the biological mother on the grounds that she was living apart from her children and still 'chooses' not to live with them full-time. Yet this is not the worst accusation that this biological mother faces as she also stands accused of choosing a partner who may pose a serious threat to her children thus failing in her most basic duty as a parent, that of protecting her child. Later in the post this stepmother makes her inversion of a discourse that idealises biological mothers explicit.

*Extract 28. Post by: W78*

Some people have a hard time realizing that not all mothers are good...OH [Other Half] is definitely not perfect, neither is MIL [Mother-in-law] and neither am I, but he is a far better parent than BM [Biological Mother] and I thought anybody could see that!

Not all mothers are good and this stepmother acknowledges that many people are less than perfect as parents. Yet a discourse of motherhood in which mothers are (or should be) innately nurturing, all-loving and all-giving, unselfish and always putting the child's best interests first, even setting aside their own needs to do so, is frequently drawn on in these data. Two short extracts from the reflexive post mentioned earlier and one extract from a response to that post further demonstrate this.

*Extract 29. Post by: W69*

I feel I have evidence enough through her children's behaviour towards me and their attitude towards their father, to know she has always acted selfishly and had a hugely negative effect on her children.

*Extract 30. Post by: W69.*

But more importantly, surely she should love her children enough to not allow her feelings to impact on their well-being?

*Extract 31. Post by: W40.*

many of these troublesome BMs [Biological Mothers] are not level, rational, successful and free thinking women who are committed to putting their child's wellbeing above their own feelings.

We see in these extracts that biological mothers are actually held to an unrealistically high standard: they must be level, rational, successful and free-thinking as well as putting their child's wellbeing above their own. I would argue that few people could live up to such ideals yet, here, the biological mothers are judged accordingly when they fail to meet to such a standard. In this way, without

directly referencing the wicked stepmother myth, biological mothers are positioned as bad mothers with the implication that the stepmother, who recognises the error of the biological mother's ways, takes up the counter position of the binary becoming the good mother. This reversal may also be achieved with more explicit demonstrations of how the stepmother functions as a 'good mother', often using direct comparison with the 'bad' biological mother's parenting. Extract thirty two provides a good example. In this case the stepdaughter has recently chosen to move in full-time with her father and stepmother and to cease contact with her biological mother. Her two siblings still live with their biological mother.

*Extract 32. Post by: W57*

She [stepdaughter] was so lovely – and was also grateful that I took her with me to a decent hair salon and got her a new hair cut which she adores, and then took her for coffee and lunch so we could chat. Don't think she was used to getting some 1:1 attention without someone expecting something back or suddenly turning on her without warning.

The school have noticed a 'marked improvement' in her behaviour, so if BM [Biological Mother] decided to try and get social services involved in our life they will not have anything to work with, and the teachers are already becoming aware of the changes and questioning the reasons why things were going so wrong so quickly. Especially seen as the day after SD [Stepdaughter] moved in with us she was back in school with no trouble and her brother and sister have not been in since. I can see me being a full time SM [Stepmother] of three in the future :o – with a BM [Biological Mother] that wants me dead for 'stealing her children' as she puts it. I have done nothing of the sort, in

fact my life would be easier without them in my home, but I don't make them feel like crap or shout at them for no reason, they can relax and be themselves in our house. BM [Biological Mother will never understand that, she has done this to her own daughter, not us.

Here the stepmother provides several examples of her good parenting and contrasts this with a biological mother who fails to give her daughter sufficient attention, wants something in return, is unpredictable and fails to allow her children to 'be themselves'. The schools are also called on as evidence of the improvement in the child's behaviour in response to this improved parenting, perhaps in anticipation of a challenge by the biological mother

#### ***6.5. Some reflexive comments, comparisons and contrasting cases.***

I have sometimes found the web forum data difficult to work with and that has been particularly true in relation to talk of the biological mother. I have tried to reflect on why some of this rhetoric is so challenging, and to use that reflection productively in my analysis (Elliot, Ryan & Hollway, 2012; McAvoy, 2013). I am a stepmother myself but I am also a biological mother and, as a feminist, I am very conscious of the impact of ideological positionings that hold mothers to impossibly high standards and hold them morally accountable, both for their children's behaviour and for any difficulty their child may face. I mentioned sisterhood in my introduction to this chapter and, perhaps, this is an aspiration for me that I often see lacking on the forum in relation to talk of biological mothers. In addition, the intensity of the language on the forum and the degree of emotion that is evident in

many of the posts as these stepmothers try to demonstrate that they are not just right but righteous, did not initially engender my empathy. There are also issues of poor language use and typographical and spelling errors that I know may often owe more to the medium than to the individuals but which nevertheless impacted on my initial impressions of these women. However, as I immersed myself more deeply in the data these latter issues had less impact and I was able to focus more on trying to understand what was at stake and thus why the level of emotion and the intensity of language were needed. I also looked at how talk of the biological mothers differed between the web forum and the interviews. The use of two different data sources was not intended to facilitate comparison, however, noting the differences between the two suggested that this would be a fruitful area to explore and as always in this analysis I tried to remain alert to contrasting cases. What I realised was that for many of my interview participants the biological mother had little impact on their lives, either because their partners were widowers when they met or because the stepchildren were already adults with independent relationships with their father, whereas on the forum stepchildren were usually young and most biological mothers were still living. When the stepmothers I interviewed were talking about the biological mothers of their stepchildren they were often talking about the fairly distant past, perhaps making the use of a less emotional tone understandable. One of my interview participants suggested that real friendliness between ex-spouses was unusual but two of the stepmothers I interviewed had become friends with the biological mother.

However, in both cases this had only happened after several years with relations much more difficult to start with. For example:

*Extract 33. Interview with: Participant 22*

P22. and that was sort of a big issue but yeah her mum's still alive so she lived with her mum in [local town] which is not too far away. Lots of trips backwards and forwards there but er we had a few ups and downs with her mum, nothing too major actually um and in fact we've now come out of it we are now quite good friends.

S. Right.

P22. In fact we've been round there to dinner this year, they came to us just before Christmas time and we do have quite a nice relationship.

Time, then, may play a part in building less antagonistic relationships and many women on the web forum are fairly new stepmothers. However, interviews did include some criticisms of biological mothers as some extracts earlier in this chapter demonstrate and the following exchange occurred in my interview with participant eight:

*Extract 34. Interview with: P8.*

S. When you say, his mum, er the way you said that made me think you had some issues with the way that she was parenting him, er was that, was that a thing?

P8. ....Err.. well.....*[long pause and participant looks uncomfortable]*

S. Ok. I won't push you on that.

P8. Yeah.. I don't think she was the best of mums in the world, put it like that.

Whilst not making any specific claims about the biological mother's lack of abilities as a parent, and certainly without the use of any strong or emotive language, this

stepmother nevertheless made her disapproval very clear with the implication that she was actually a better parent. Of course, there may be many reasons for her reticence but in saying very little she also presented herself as a good person, reluctant to speak ill of another.

The reflexive thread, that I have referred to from time to time in this chapter, in which one stepmother reflects on why biological mothers are constructed in particular ways on the site, was actually helpful in my own reflections. I have therefore included the initial post here as extract thirty five.

*Extract 35. Post by: W69*

It seems that there are no end of BM's [Biological Mothers] who either want to get back with the father of their child(ren), or if not that, don't want the father to move on at all and have a new GF/[Girlfriend] wife. From my own experience and the, admittedly little, I've read here, this is quite a usual attitude for the BM [Biological Mother] to have along with a vast array of other negative traits.

Now, if the BM [Biological Mother] harbours those feelings and acts on them in any way, I can imagine it will impact on the skids [stepkids] to quite a large and negative degree. This strikes me as particularly counteractive to benefiting the BM [Biological Mother] in any way whatsoever, she only ends up with stressy children whose issues make *her* life a misery, never mind their father's and his new wife's and she'll also show herself up to her exH [ex-Husband]. But more importantly, surely she should love her children enough to not allow her feelings to impact on their well-being?



So how much of this negative attitude are we imagining? Although I'm sure that some BM [Biological Mothers] do have these traits and I don't doubt the stories about them here, I do wonder if we may at times imagine or exaggerate their actions and feelings to fulfil something within us? Is it because of the good feeling that we have 'won' a man from another woman, that because of that we are a better person than her, another woman?

I think women tend to be quite competitive amongst themselves as far as men go and I, for one, find it very hard work knowing one's H's [Husband's] ex will always be on the scene because they have children together, so I wonder if the thought that she isn't acting in her children's best interests is a way of assuming a position of superiority, which may not be completely accurate.

Now, I am VERY reluctant to think anything positive about my H's ex wife, my skids [stepkids] BM [Biological Mother]. I feel I have evidence enough through her children's behaviour towards me and their attitude towards their father, to know she has always acted selfishly and had a hugely negative effect on her children. But I'm also honest enough to know that I'll look for anything to see her in a bad light.

Bit of a ramble and I'm navel gazing, but I'm very interested to read your thoughts.

Many of the responses to that original post utilize some of the most extreme language, express strong emotion and become very defensive of the ways in which biological mothers are being positioned. As I have indicated this made the data quite difficult to work with at times but that has been useful to me because it helps to highlight just how important these positions are for the stepmothers own

identities and how important the site is as a source of support. As discussed earlier, stepmothers may feel stigmatized and they may struggle to find support from non-stepmothering friends. The reflections of web participant sixty-nine seem to breach the unofficial rules of the site in that the stepmothers are challenged to draw on alternative discursive resources, rather than offering uncritical support to any negative discourse about the biological mothers. This is inevitably threatening to those who rely on that support to cope with often difficult situations. Craig, Harvey-Knowles and Johnson (2012) also looked at stepmothers using an online support group and found that a major topic of discussion was the benefit of the site in offering supportive communication for women struggling with difficulties at home. Just as Madge and O'Connor (2006) found in their research with new mothers, the internet can provide an important source of support and information and can be empowering for women. However, Madge and O'Connor (2006) also caution that the internet, where anonymity is possible, can both liberate and constrain since they found in their research that restrictive and unequal gender stereotypes were encouraged. This does raise a possible concern that, although they provide an important source of support for stepmothers, online forums may also have the potential to reinforce and escalate negative and perhaps unhelpful discourses that might be resisted elsewhere. However, this study cannot provide evidence for this as, whilst there are differences here between the ways that biological mothers were discussed on the forum and in interviews, there were also, as I have pointed out, many differences between the two groups in addition to the

different contexts. There is not space for further exploration of this topic here but it does suggest an interesting avenue for future investigation.

### ***Chapter summary and some concluding remarks.***

Stepmothers today will often have stepchildren whose biological mother is still living and with whom they are likely to have some involvement as separated parents continue to co-parent across households. Previous research (Visser & Visser, 1988) has suggested that the continued involvement of the biological mother restricts opportunities for stepmothers to become actively involved as parents and may thus contribute to role ambiguity and consequent difficulties for the stepmother. Other research indicates that the relationship with the biological mother is linked to stepmother anxiety (Doodson, 2014) and depression (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012). The few previous studies that have looked at stepmothering and social support have found that the ex-wife or biological mother is an often discussed topic (Christian, 2005; Craig & Johnson, 2011; Jones, 2004) and that was also the case in the present study, at least within the web forum data.

Just as Jacobson (1995) found that ex-spouses are often cast in a negative light in order to strengthen solidarity in the new marriage and maintain a positive view of self and of marriage, the present study found that constructions of the biological mother were rarely positive and this chapter has demonstrated how these constructions form part of the identity work that stepmothers undertake. In this research there were three dominant constructions of biological mothers; as mad, as bad and as dangerous, particularly to their children. It was apparent that, just as

Foucault (2001) discusses changing conceptualisations of madness, discourses of madness in these data are drawn on in different ways with some pejorative and others sympathetic. Constructions of the biological mother as in some way mad often demonstrate her irrationality in contrast with a reasonable and rational stepmother. Positioning the biological mother as bad can also emphasise her responsibility for ending her previous relationship, thereby allowing the stepmother to occupy a more morally admirable position by avoiding a troubling identity as 'the other woman'. Biological mothers were also constructed as dangerous or damaging to stepmothers themselves, to their ex-partners and particularly to their children. In this they were frequently positioned as bad mothers in contrast with a good stepmother who demonstrated her understanding of what it is to be a good mother.

Dominant discourses of mothering and family were drawn on across these constructions together with moral discourses that frequently showed a concern with truth and lies. The impact of the wicked stepmother myth was also apparent, as were narratives of relationship progression and of love as a meeting of soul mates that must be 'the one'. Biological mothers were strongly 'othered' in these data with many binary constructions contrasting biological mothers and stepmothers. These included inversions of the dominant constructions of good mother versus bad stepmother and wronged woman versus other woman. The 'othering' of biological mothers was generally much more strongly expressed on the web forum than in the interviews. This was challenging to work with and analyse, but demonstrated the importance of the web forum as a source of social

support for stepmothers. It also indicated the centrality, for stepmothers work on often troubled identities, of positionings that are morally admirable in contrast with negative constructions of biological mothers. I began this chapter with a reference to feminist ideals of sisterhood and it is clear that the web forum does provide such a mutually supportive alliance for stepmothers, so long as the unspoken rules are followed. This contrasts strongly with the ways in which another group of women, the biological mothers, are 'othered' as dominant discourses encourage binary oppositions that set women against each other. Despite this rather disappointing finding there is a more hopeful indication that, over time, less antagonistic relationships are possible and for some women even friendship between biological and stepmothers.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Conclusions**

#### ***7.1. Introduction***

I began this thesis with a retelling of the Cinderella story from the perspective of a modern day stepmother and it is twenty-first century British stepmothers who are central to this thesis. The story is a reminder that, even today, stepmothers are subject to the impact of ancient and culturally widespread myths that portray stepmothers as wicked and as cruel to their stepchildren. I have suggested here that such myths are just part of the discursive environment in which stepmothers work at, often troubled, identities.

In addition to the aim of increasing diversity in stepmothering research, this study set out to answer two broader research questions. These were:

- How do British stepmothers from varied backgrounds discursively negotiate their (troubled) identities?
- What discursive resources are drawn on in this identity work?

These were addressed by collecting data from two sources: a web forum for stepmothers and interviews with thirteen women who had adult stepchildren. The data were then analysed using a synthetic narrative-discursive approach with the findings discussed across three empirical chapters illustrated with quotations from the data. In this final chapter I will review the previous chapters including the empirical work undertaken in this study. In addition to a brief summary of each of

the empirical chapters I will then demonstrate, in more detail, how my research questions have been answered by looking at my findings across the three analytic chapters together in a section I have called Negotiating Troubled Identities.

Throughout this review I will show how the current work has made distinct methodological, theoretical and empirical contributions to the existing body of research on stepmothers. Some comments on the differences between the two data sources are included. Later in the chapter I will also consider some limitations of the study. The chapter ends with a consideration of some potential extensions to this research and some final reflexive comments.

## ***7.2 A review of previous chapters***

In the first two chapters I discussed some of the significant changes to family life over recent years identifying some of the wide variety of family forms that are now co-existing and arguing that further radical shifts are likely. I have presented data showing that, although stepfamilies are numerically common, they do not fit with widely held notions of family as biological and nuclear. In addition, according to the British Attitudes Survey (Duncan & Philips, 2008), despite some evidence of an increasing acceptance of diverse family forms for adults without children, this is less true for parents. This means that stepfamilies may still be negatively perceived to the potential detriment of all their members. Additionally, in a neoliberal climate with an emphasis on individual responsibility, self-management and management of risk there are increasing demands on all parents. These include both intensive mothering and greater expectations of fathers. As I have argued, such expectations

sit alongside political rhetoric that both vilifies and idealises single mothers and places particular pressures on fathers living apart from their children. I have previously pointed out there is evidence that women usually re-partner later than men after relationship breakdown. This means that many re-partnered men are (at least initially) trying to co-parent with an ex-partner who is a 'single' mother. Such rhetoric then, may impact stepmothers since it can adversely affect their partners, the mothers of their stepchildren and the co-parenting relationship between these separated parents.

I have shown that stepfamily research has often focussed on the impacts of divorce, remarriage and stepfamily membership on the children and that stepfather families have been studied much more frequently than stepmother families. The review of the literature in chapter two has shown that, to date, there has been limited research attention given to stepmothers themselves. However, a number of researchers have found that stepmothering is experienced as more difficult than stepfathering. Additionally, stepmothers are more likely than stepfathers to suffer psychological distress. The continuing importance, for feminist research, of women's experiences and understandings of motherhood together with these potential difficulties of stepmothering as a route to motherhood, therefore made this an important topic for research. The present study has added to the feminist literature on varied routes to mothering. It has explored the discursive environment in which modern British stepmothers operate, from the perspective of the stepmothers themselves. In doing this the study has used a



methodological approach which reconceptualises understandings of identity thus contributing theoretically to a limited body of feminist work on stepmothering.

As I argued in chapter one, not only has stepfamily research often neglected stepmothers and stepmother families but it has also focussed on a limited range of stepfamily types in other respects. For example, families with children over eighteen have rarely been included. One of the objectives of this study was therefore to address this by including women with adult stepchildren. Whilst any single study is unlikely to incorporate all possible diversity, by gathering data from both a web forum and strategic interviews this work has achieved the objective of extending the diversity of participants and has thus made a contribution to the existing research. This thesis has made a further contribution by adding to a very limited body of literature researching British stepmothers and to a limited international literature taking a discursive or narrative approach to stepmothering. It therefore makes a distinctive empirical contribution to understandings of contemporary stepmothers.

The methodology used in this research was based on the synthetic narrative-discursive approach developed by Taylor and Littleton (2006) which itself draws on both the synthetic discursive approach proposed by Wetherell (1998) and on a form of narrative analysis. This amalgamation addresses the criticism levelled at discursive approaches to the study of identity, which emphasise flux and variability, that they therefore fail to account for the experience of continuity that people have in their sense of themselves. My concern has been with understanding the way that 'identity trouble', due to inconsistent positionings or to potentially

undesirable identifications, may be worked at to enact repair. Although the approach has previously been used in biographical work based on interview data, a further contribution of the present study has been to extend this methodology to include the analysis of data taken from a web forum. This has been successful in establishing that in the context of a web forum stepmothers draw on identifiably local discursive resources, including their own family backgrounds, in addition to other culturally available discourses and canonical narratives. Demonstrating this consistency across data sources underpins the strengths of the synthetic narrative discursive approach.

The empirical chapters have considered the findings of this study within three broad meta-themes and whilst these are not the only themes that could have been drawn from these data, they were highly relevant to the research questions I posed. Moreover, they have been a useful way to organise a very large data corpus. This organisation has provided a basis for exploring and understanding some of the ways in which stepmothers may take up or resist particular identities. The first of these analytical chapters examined stepmothers' talk about their male partners and was entitled hapless, helpless and hopeless to reflect the ways in which men were often constructed, in the data, as in some way inadequate or in need of help. I have argued that by constructing men as 'needy' the discursive resources drawn on here open up particular positions for the speakers which may offer ways to enact repair to troubled identities. The chapter was organised around four overlapping and interwoven topics. The first is a narrative of rescue in which male partners were constructed as helpless in failing to live up to a hegemonic masculine

role as breadwinner and therefore shown to be in need of financial rescue by their partner. They were also constructed as in need of rescue from emotional difficulties and this construction was seen to overlap with an idea of men as hopeless at emotional work in managing relationships. Emotional difficulties also linked with constructions of men as damaged since such damage was usually shown to be emotional or psychological. Additionally, talk of men as hopeless at managing relationships included reference to their limitations in relationships with their children and this was therefore closely related to constructions of men as inadequate as fathers. At least two of the participants in this study were stepmothers within a relationship with another woman. Throughout the analysis I remained alert to contrasting cases which did not fit with the predominant patterns found in the data. I therefore found it interesting that these women never constructed their female partners as needy but did sometimes construct men as in some way hopeless or inadequate as parents. The men in question were their stepchildrens' fathers. This indicates that such constructions are both widely culturally available and highly gendered.

The second empirical chapter considered stepmothers' talk about home. This is not a topic that has been explored in much (if any) previous stepfamily literature and yet as Taylor (2003) has argued, home is central to our lives and home and a sense of place may be key issues in identity work. Home is also an important issue for stepfamilies since, at their formation, stepfamilies or some family members will have to move home and family members may also move between homes. I have also noted that Philip (2014) found that, after divorce or separation, when men

may not live full-time with their children, it is crucial to their role as fathers, that they have a suitable space in which to engage with their children. In chapter five I discussed the arguments made by a number of authors that home is a multidimensional concept. This was borne out in the data which demonstrated that home also had many meanings and resonances for the stepmothers in this study. The analysis has considered these meanings in respect of home as both a physical and an emotional or relational space whilst recognising that the two are always intertwined. In this research stepmothers often expressed concern to ensure that sufficient physical space was made for everyone, particularly that the children's needs were considered. However, this was not always achievable and, as I have argued, recent welfare changes in the UK, particularly the 'bedroom tax', are likely to make this difficult for more stepfamilies. This highlights an important contribution of this research in respect of policy. This is to have made evident the implications of the disjunction between a welfare policy which espouses continuing involvement of both the biological parents with their children, after relationship breakdown, and yet makes shared parenting difficult to achieve for many. The data also provided evidence of the ways in which home, as a repository of material objects, can emphasise the lack of a shared history as the stepfamily tries to integrate different cultures. Such objects could therefore be triggers that left women feeling excluded because of reminders from a past of which they were not a part. I have argued in this thesis that stepmother families have the potential to resist or re-negotiate gendered norms in respect of childcare and domestic tasks since the children are not biologically shared. However, these data have

demonstrated that such resistance or re-negotiation can be difficult and may rarely, therefore, be achieved. This leaves heterosexual stepmothers carrying a greater burden of household work than their partners, just as much research has demonstrated to be the case in other families (e.g. Lyonette, 2015). In discussing the affective meanings of home, I have described how the women in this study expressed feelings of invasion and also, often, of exclusion from the father-children unit. Ultimately, home had many negative resonances for stepmothers so that it was a place in which they sometimes struggled with their own identities and did not always feel 'at home'.

The third empirical chapter considered stepmothers talk about the biological mother of their stepchildren. As I have discussed modern stepmothers will often have stepchildren whose biological mother is still living and with whom they are likely to have some involvement as separated parents continue to co-parent across households. I have shown that this is a relationship that some other authors (Christian, 2005; Craig & Johnson, 2011; Jones, 2004) have identified as an important topic of discussion between stepmothers. In chapter two I considered examples of research which demonstrated that the relationship with the biological mother is one which may impact directly on the stepmother's own psychological well-being. As several studies have shown it may be linked to stepmother anxiety (e.g. Doodson, 2014) and depression (e.g. Shapiro & Stewart, 2012). Chapter two also noted Jacobson's (1995) finding that ex-spouses may be negatively framed in order to increase cohesiveness in the new marriage and to maintain a positive view of self and of marriage. This was certainly reflected in the present study where, as

the analysis in chapter six has demonstrated, constructions of the biological mother were rarely positive. I discussed three dominant constructions of biological mothers that were found in these data; mad, bad and dangerous. I have shown how constructions of biological mothers as mad sometimes demonstrated some sympathy for these women but were more often less than sympathetic. I have found it interesting that, as mentioned in the previous chapter, within the criminal justice system there is a highly gendered differentiation between 'madness' and 'badness'. In this women convicted of crimes, particularly serious crimes, are often seen as 'abnormal and mad' whilst men similarly convicted are more likely to be seen as 'normal and bad'. Yet, in the current study, although women may be framed as mad, and 'abnormal' or 'other' in contrast with 'normal' stepmothers, they were also often shown to be bad with no room for mitigating circumstances. I have presented data showing constructions of biological mothers as bad and sometimes dangerous both for their ex-partners and in their behaviour towards the stepmother herself. Most often, however, I have shown how these data construct biological mothers as bad and potentially dangerous for their children. Chapter six has evidenced the ways that all these constructions form part of the identity work undertaken by stepmothers, allowing them to position themselves in more positive, and often, more morally admirable ways. Again I was interested to explore any differences in the discourses of stepmothers in same sex relationships. Since for these women their partners were the biological mothers, it was unsurprising to find that their talk did not follow the same patterns. However, as I

have discussed in relation to talk of male partners in chapter four, these women did sometimes offer criticisms of their stepchildren's other parent, the father.

### ***7.3 Negotiating troubled identities***

In each of my three empirical chapters I have discussed a number of different troubles to identity which stepmothers were working to repair. Many of these troubles, and the discursive resources utilised in their negotiation, arose in respect of more than one of the analytic topics. In this section of my concluding chapter I therefore want to draw some of these together to emphasise the ways that such patterns of talk recur across the data. This then provides a summary of the ways in which I have answered my research questions throughout the analysis.

The first difficulty I want to discuss here is the lack of power and control that stepmothers may feel. As I argued in chapter three, recognition of differential power positions is important in the feminist approach taken here so that this aspect of stepmothers' identity work is of particular interest. In chapter two I discussed some previous research (e.g. Henry & McCue, 2009; Roper & Capdevila, 2010) which had also found that stepmothers experienced feelings of powerlessness. I have argued that this is the result of the lack of control that stepmothers may feel they have over a number of key issues in their lives. For example, they have had no choice about the existence of their stepchildren, may have little or no say in when their stepchildren visit, how they behave, parenting practices and the financial support paid by their partner for his children and ex-wife. I have argued that one way that stepmothers negotiate this trouble is by

constructing their partner as in some way needy. This resists a powerless identification by constructing their partner as powerless and opening up a more powerful position for themselves in contrast. I have shown how this may be done by offering a financial rescue narrative. In this, a discourse of men as financial providers, underpinned by a hegemonic masculinity, may be inverted, although often still understood as normative. I have also demonstrated that stepmothers may offer a narrative in which their male partners are rescued from emotional difficulties or in which stepmothers offer care and repair for the emotional damage suffered by their partner. In doing this I have shown that they may draw on a discourse of men as 'new fathers', with an expectation that they should provide both financially and emotionally for their children. In tension with this I have also shown how stepmothers may utilise a more hegemonic discourse of masculinity in which men are poor at emotional work, often including their relationships with their children. As men are thus shown to be inadequate as parents, stepmothers can take responsibility for, and some control over, parenting tasks. In doing this, as I have argued, they may draw on gendered discourses of parenting in which, as mentioned many times in this thesis, parenting is women's work and becomes equated with mothering. As I have discussed across all three empirical chapters, the lack of control felt by stepmothers is in contrast with the control over their lives that they may feel is held by the ex-wife, the woman they most often refer to as the biological mother. In taking financial control, or in other ways creating more powerful identifications for themselves, stepmothers therefore offer resistance to her control. I have shown how this may sometimes be supported by constructing



the ex-partner as responsible for causing the emotional damage they have to repair. Additionally, as argued in chapter six, positioning herself as a good parent, in contrast with a biological mother who is a bad parent, also creates a powerful position for the stepmother. In doing so a highly gendered discourse, which idealises mothers as selfless, is often drawn upon.

This idealisation of mothers has also been shown, in previous chapters, to be drawn on to discursively counter the second 'trouble' I want to discuss here: the wicked stepmother myth. As I explained in chapter two, several authors have previously found that the myth remains pervasive and continues to impact views of stepmothers, including stepmothers' own perspectives. This is certainly supported by the present study where much work has been found to be undertaken by stepmothers to avoid an identification of a wicked stepmother. One of the ways this is achieved is in contrast with a biological mother who is often shown to be mad, bad or dangerous, especially to her children. Thus she becomes the wicked mother leaving the stepmother to occupy a space as a good stepmother. In this way the wicked stepmother myth and a discourse which idealises biological mothers are inverted. As demonstrated across the three empirical chapters, this construction of a stepmother as 'not wicked' is also often reinforced by drawing on familial discourses to demonstrate her understanding of good parenting practices. These include discourses of children as innocent and thus requiring adult care. They also include a discourse of children's needs as taking priority over those of adults so that children are 'put first', for example by making space for them even at some cost or sacrifice for the stepmother. Such sacrifice itself draws on a discourse that

idealises mothers as unselfish and relates to a moral discourse of parenting. I've also shown that moral discourses are drawn on in discussions of the biological mother as bad since this is often related to her lack of truthfulness in contrast with a truthful stepmother.

Stepmothers in this study have also been shown to construct themselves as good (rather than wicked) in the care they offer to their partners. This includes rescuing them from financial and other difficulties and caring for them when they have been 'damaged', often by an ex-wife or partner, as discussed previously.

A third potential trouble, for some stepmothers, that I have identified in this work, relates to one of the difficulties of being a second wife, particularly if the stepmother is much younger than her partner. I have presented evidence to show that this age difference is a fairly frequent occurrence, both in the present study and in other research. As a younger woman a stepmother may fear an accusation of being in the relationship only for money, of being a 'gold-digger'. I have argued that the constructions presented of stepmothers as providing financial rescue, often incurring some sacrifice themselves, perform what Billig (1987) has called 'rhetorical work'. Here, the 'trouble' does not arise in the immediate context but may be an imagined criticism or relate to previous incidents in their own life history. In fact, as discussed in chapter four some women drew on their experiences of their own stepmothers in this respect.

A fourth way in which I have argued that a stepmothering identity may be troubled is also related to being a second wife or partner. In this case the issue arises from

the constant reminders of the partner's past in the form of his children and the necessity of his having an ongoing relationship with ex-wife or partner. These reminders offer two sorts of trouble. Firstly, I have contended that not being the 'first love' troubles a discourse of romance in which each of us has just one 'soul-mate', the 'one and only'. Of course, this is problematic for most people in a culture in which serial monogamy is so common as to be normative. However, as I have suggested, for stepmothers the reminders of this past are ever present. In this study I have offered examples of the ways in which this difficulty of not being the first love is negotiated including demonstrations that the partner has been damaged by his ex and is thus in need of rescue or care and repair. This constructs the ex as not being a 'true love' since she has been shown to do such damage and thus never to have really cared for him. In contrast this allows the stepmother to take up a caring role thereby demonstrating that her love is genuine and, it may even involve sacrifice by the stepmother which assists in justifying her claim.

There is an additional problem with being a second wife or partner that I have discussed in the analysis of these data. This relates to a potential accusation of being 'the other woman', that is, that you have been responsible for the end of your partner's previous relationship. As in previous examples this draws on a moral discourse and I have suggested that such responsibility is particularly heinous where there are children involved (as is always the case for stepmothers) since one may be accused of breaking up, not just a relationship, but a family as well.

Familial discourses have sometimes been drawn on here to demonstrate an understanding of the importance of family for the welfare of children. Again, in

response to this trouble stepmothers often undertook rhetorical work to counter such potential or remembered accusations. Narratives which incorporated references to time were often used to make it clear that the previous relationship had ended prior to the stepmother's involvement so that she could not be accused of any responsibility in the relationship's demise. I have also shown that stepmothers demonstrated their innocence as 'the other woman' by inverting this to show the previous partner as responsible for the separation (often due to her infidelity). In this way they constructed themselves as the 'true love' and the biological mother as the 'other woman'. Thus, they negotiated the two difficulties I have highlighted with being a second wife or partner.

A further difficulty for stepmothers is the extent to which they can or should take up mothering or mother like roles. As discussed in chapter two, previous literature has found that this can be a source of contention for all family members. Yet, as I have argued, in the current study it was often apparent that stepmothers were positioned by their stepchildren or partners as kin-keepers or in mothering roles. It was evident that these gendered identities, linked to dominant discourses of mothering and family, were difficult to resist. However, I've also argued that at times, such constructions were not resisted because of the identity work that stepmothers undertook to negotiate other troubles. For example, in order to take some control in situations where they felt powerless, stepmothers sometimes framed their partners as inadequate (particularly in their parenting), often constructing this not as criticism but as understandable given the circumstances.

This framing of men as inadequate parents left the stepmother taking control but made her complicit in positioning herself in a mothering role.

Similarly, when household chores were under discussion, men were sometimes framed as uncaring about domestic tasks, or perhaps, just less caring than women. This was then shown to become a justification for stepmothers undertaking tasks related to their stepchildren that might more fairly have been done by the children's father. In addition, I have noted that, although there was often resistance to a discourse of women as 'houseproud', housework was also referred to as a displacement activity, something that could be undertaken in order to keep oneself occupied or, perhaps, to territorialise, making a space one's own when feeling either invaded or excluded. I have argued that this may suggest one reason why gendered inequalities in domestic duties may not be challenged in stepmother families.

A sixth trouble, which I have identified in this work, is the tension that exists for stepmothers between a romantic narrative and the demands of stepfamily life. I have argued that canonical romantic narratives include a sequence of stages to a romance which feature children as a culmination, following courtship and marriage, rather than as a presence in new relationships. I've shown how the stepmothers in this study frequently drew on moral and familial discourses to demonstrate an understanding of children's needs. In this way they positioned themselves as 'good stepmothers' and as responsible adults. Often, it was suggested that the children's needs were for time to get used to the new parental relationship and to spend time with their father. However, the children's needs

were sometimes shown to conflict with the couple's need to move the relationship forward and to have time alone. However, as I have argued, for many women in this study the children's incursion into their 'couple space' could leave them feeling invaded. In addition, the data in this study have sometimes demonstrated the incompatibility of romance with domestic chores.

The final trouble that I want to refer back to here is the problem, for stepmothers, of justifying their relationship with their partner despite the many difficulties they may face. This becomes particularly difficult in view of cultural expectations that serial monogamy is normative; relationships can be ended. In this thesis I have shown that stepmothers had to work to demonstrate that their partners were worth loving despite the problems. A discourse of 'true love' was often drawn on to achieve this. Of course, this becomes a difficulty because many people do not understand or empathise with the problems that stepmothers may face. This leaves stepmothers needing support from those who can really understand the issues; that is from other stepmothers. This is an important point and I will therefore return to the topic of support in the following section.

In order to summarise the answers to the two research questions posed earlier in this thesis, this last section has reviewed some of the major troubles to their identity that stepmothers have been shown to negotiate. It has also highlighted many of the discursive resources that, I have argued, are drawn on in this identity work.

#### ***7.4 Differences between data sources***

In this research I set out to investigate patterns across the data with the two data sources chosen to complement each other and achieve the aim of greater diversity of participants. However, whilst I have looked for patterns, I have remained alert throughout to contrasting cases as these can also offer useful insights. In doing this, I have therefore considered any notable differences between the web forum and interview data. Given the differences in the available biographical data of the two groups of participants and the potential impact of the very different contexts, as previously discussed (see chapter three), differences in the discourse of the two seemed likely. Although recognising some differences, my analysis has shown that stepmothers across both data sources worked at similar identity troubles and drew on many of the same discursive resources in negotiating these. Both data sources included talk of male partners as hapless, helpless and hopeless. Both also included discussions of home as a place in which space must be made for everyone but where stepmothers might feel invaded or excluded and in which household tasks could be contentious. Similarly the web forum and interview data both offered constructions of biological mothers as mad and bad. As I have previously discussed, across the three empirical chapters, the most significant difference between the data sources has been the difference in the intensity of the language used. For all three of the meta-themes the language was generally more emotive and strongly expressed on the web forum than in the interviews. However, this was particularly marked in discussions of the biological mother and in the ways in which biological mothers were 'othered'. I have argued that this difference may be understandable

for two reasons. Firstly, my interview participants were usually talking about events that had happened in the past. This meant that, although emotion was sometimes evoked in response to difficult memories, in most cases, the issues were no longer current. On the web forum the situation was very different with stepmothers discussing topics which were of immediate or very recent concern. Secondly, there is a difference in the context itself with the anonymity provided by the forum and the protection it offers as a space in which members can expect support and understanding. The consideration of differences between the two data sources has been very useful in highlighting the issue of support which, I have argued, is very important for stepmothers. In this regard the findings in the current study are in accord with some previous research findings that show how support, from others in the same situation, is helpful for stepmothers who seek both advice and relevant referents.

However, as these data have demonstrated and as I have argued in chapter six, online forums, whilst offering mutual support, also have the potential to strengthen and escalate negative and perhaps unhelpful discourses that might more easily be resisted in different environments.

### ***7.5 Limitations of the study***

In undertaking this research I set out to incorporate a diverse sample of stepmothers. However, as I acknowledged in chapter three, there are limitations to this. On the web forum the biographical information about participants is restricted



to that which the women involved chose to provide and this was not comprehensive. In addition, my interview participants were all white and most (although not all) were middle class in that they had professional or managerial jobs. Given my earlier arguments about the impact of poverty on stepfamilies and the effects of cultural differences, it is clear that many factors intersect in the experience of stepmothering and this work has not been able to fully explore all of these. In addition, the nature of the discursive methodology used is both local and contingent so that it is not possible to claim these findings as generalizable. However, this research has identified patterns of talk that are common across two very different data sources involving a large number of (fairly) diverse participants. It is therefore reasonable to understand these as widely culturally available, at least within the British context.

#### ***7.6. Potential extensions***

I have found the issues of support for stepmothers very interesting. This is, in part, because my initial decision to research this topic was influenced by my experience of a friend who had recently become a stepmother asking for my support. Most concerning, in the current study, was the finding that a web forum, as a support network, also has the potential to increase potentially unhelpful negativity. This could certainly be a useful area for further research, perhaps including comparison with other types of support. This might also look at how such negativity can be managed or avoided.

As I argued in chapter one, the numbers of people with adult stepchildren are likely to increase. This suggests two further areas that would be useful for future study: The first of these, a topic that was raised briefly in some of my interviews, is that of step-grandparenting. Different views were expressed but this was a very small sample of women, some speaking from experience and others anticipating the future. The second area related to adult stepchildren is the issue of stepchildren and support for ageing stepparents. Again this has received very little research attention but with an ageing population, and more with adult stepchildren, exploration would be useful and might offer relevant information to support policy.

### ***7.7 Some final reflexive comments***

I have argued that, because they do not effectively mimic biological nuclear families, stepfamilies may have to work to establish new ways of enacting family and parenting, often across households. This offers opportunities to rethink gendered patterns of care and ways of relating. The discourses identified in this research can therefore be central to either challenging or reifying gendered constructions of parenting, families and relationships. One empirical contribution of this research is therefore to demonstrate the ways that discourses incorporating dominant constructions such as those of masculinity, motherhood, romance and family, are drawn on in the identity work of stepmothers. As discussed in my empirical chapters, although there are sometimes inversions of 'traditional' gender roles, this is very limited. I have contended that constructions of men as hapless, helpless and hopeless offer few opportunities for men or women to challenge the

heterosexual gender binary. They are also unhelpful in achieving greater support for stepmothers from their partners. In analysing talk of home I have revealed mechanisms relating to control, territorialisation and displacement activity that may explain why gendered inequalities in domestic work might not be challenged in stepmother families. The empirical work, especially as discussed in chapter six has also demonstrated how dominant discourses encourage binary oppositions that set women against each other. This may contribute to distress for stepmothers but also makes co-parenting across households more difficult.

In summary then, this work has made distinctive theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions to understandings of contemporary British stepmothers. Theoretically, it has contributed to feminist and other work which theorises identity in a different way to that understood within mainstream psychology. It has drawn attention to policy implications (particularly for stepmother families) of findings relating to the importance of home and the needs for sufficient physical space for children even when they do not live in the household full-time. Methodologically it has extended the synthetic narrative-discursive approach developed by Taylor and Littleton (2006), demonstrating its robustness in use with a novel data source. Empirically this work has offered detailed understanding, not just of the difficulties faced by stepmothers but of the work that they must do to repair troubled identities. It has explored issues of home and constructions of men as 'needy' that have received little or no previous research focus. It has also provided support for previous work that has pointed to the centrality of the relationship between stepmothers and biological mothers and has demonstrated

that dominant discourses may be unhelpful in encouraging binary oppositions that set women against each other. Despite this rather disappointing finding there is a more hopeful indication that, over time less antagonistic relationships are possible and for some women even friendship between biological and stepmothers may develop.

As I mentioned in chapter two, more than twenty-five years ago Smith (1990) concluded that the professional literature focussed too much on the problems of stepfamily life, neglecting the strengths. Although this work offers support for previous research suggesting that stepmothering can be very stressful, it also offers some hope. There are satisfactions for women such as the pride they express in their relationships with stepchildren. It is for this reason, and because of my own (very fortunate) experience of being a stepmother and step-grandmother, that I ended my preface on a hopeful and positive note.

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## **Appendices**

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|--------------------|--|
| <b>Appendix 1.</b> | Guidelines for using the website                         |
| <b>Appendix 2.</b> | Abbreviations used on the website                        |
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## Guidelines for Use

The Childless Stepmums Forum is designed for stepmothers to share their own experiences, learn from stepparents who've been there before and work on building a healthy relationship with children who are not their own.

In accordance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), forum membership is open to anyone over the age of 16 and we ask that all users be responsible for their contributions. Make sure your posts are in good taste and are considerate towards fellow users.

### 1. Privacy

We do not display personal information about members and will never pass on their details to a third party. It is the user's choice to display further personal details such as their first names.

To protect the safety of our members we do not allow the publication of personal information such as home addresses, telephone numbers, names of schools or workplaces. Any such posts will be deleted by the moderators.

### 2. Offensive / Defamatory Language

We may occasionally remove postings deemed to be offensive or abusive, or potentially libellous which could put the website in legal jeopardy. Users who use

offensive language or act in an antisocial or unacceptable way will be banned from using the discussion board.

If you wish to report a post that you find offensive, please contact us using the 'report to moderator' link at the bottom of the post.

### 3. Advertising

The Childless Stepmums Forum does not allow the promotion of commercial products or services within its message boards. Any such posts will be deleted by the moderator.

If you have a website you would like us to add to our links page, please contact us directly at [admin@childlessstepmums.co.uk](mailto:admin@childlessstepmums.co.uk)

### 4. Board Subjects

The forum is made up of a number of discussion boards each covering a different subject area. Please try to add your post in the correct forum as it will make it easier for other users to join the conversation. Occasionally the moderator may move posted threads to a more appropriate location or delete them if they are wholly inappropriate within the context of the site.

**Abbreviations used on the web forum.**

SM - Stepmother  
DH - Dear/Darling Husband  
DP - Dear/Darling Partner  
OH - Other Half  
BM - Biological Mother (of the stepchildren)

SS - Stepson (also with age in years eg SS9)  
OSS - Older Stepson  
YSS - Younger Stepson  
SD - Stepdaughter  
OSD - Older Stepdaughter  
YSD - Younger Stepdaughter  
SK - Stepkids also 'Skids'

DS - Dear/Darling Son  
DD - Dear/Darling Daughter  
PIL - Parents in Law  
MIL - Mother in Law  
FIL - Father in Law  
SIL - Sister in Law  
BIL - Brother in Law

EOW - Every Other Weekend  
PU - Pick Up  
DO - Drop Off  
TTC - Trying To Conceive  
PAS - Parental Alienation Syndrome

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### **Information Sheet**

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project that I am carrying out as part of my studies for a PhD at the Open University. My interest in this area arises from my own experiences as a stepmother and my finding that there is little academic research looking specifically at the experiences of stepmothers. At the same time, some researchers suggest that there appear to be greater difficulties for women, than for men, in the stepparenting role. I hope that this research will benefit stepmothers (and their families) by providing a better understanding of the variety of ways in which stepmothers may perceive and experience their roles.

I would like to interview you to ask about your experiences of being a stepmother. The interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed. The interview will last for around 60 to 90 minutes and will not be formally structured; I want to hear about your experiences and every situation is different but I have listed below some of the areas we might discuss. The audio recordings will be used only for this study. These recordings will be destroyed once the research is complete. You will have the opportunity to see the printed transcript and amend it in any way you like. By recording the interview I am able to interact more fully rather than being focussed on note taking and this ensures that an accurate record is kept and that your views and experiences can be fully incorporated into the research.

As a stepmother myself I know that this can be a sensitive topic so if there are any areas you would prefer not to discuss that is fine – just let me know in advance or as issues arise during the discussion.

If you consent to participate, the information from this interview and others will be used in my PhD thesis and may also be used in other academic articles and conference papers. Your real name will not be used. Some of your comments may be quoted directly (although they will be completely anonymous). You should not agree to take part if you are not comfortable with this.

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time during the interview

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this research. If you change your mind at any stage, including during the interview, you may withdraw from the research with no adverse consequences and without giving a reason for withdrawing. You also have the right to withdraw your data up to one month after the interview has taken place by contacting me (details given below).

If you agree to participate in this research you will be asked to sign a consent form to show that you have agreed to participate.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you should not agree to take part if you are not satisfied with any of the details explained above.

If you would like advice or support in your stepmothering role or if participating in this study raises issues that you wish to explore further I have included below details of two organizations that can offer help to stepparents.

Best wishes,

Sandra Roper

The following organisations can provide advice and support for stepparents:

Parentline Plus

520 Highgate Studios

53-79 Highgate Road

Kentish Town

London

NW5 1TL

[www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

0800 800 2222



Relate

[www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

0300 100 1234

### **Interview Guide – Stepmothering – Areas for discussion**

1. Can you tell me about your family and how you became a stepmother?
2. Do you think of yourself as a stepmother? If not how do you see yourself and how has this changed over time?
3. How do you see your role as a stepmother? And how has this changed?
4. How do you and your partner make decisions about the children?
5. Do you have any contact with the children's other parent?
6. How do you see your family?
7. How do you think other people view stepfamilies?
8. Do you think you have benefited from being a stepmother?
9. Is there any advice you would give to other women planning to become stepmothers?
10. Is there anything else about your experiences as a stepmother that you'd like to tell me about?

## INTERVIEWS - CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study about the experiences of stepmothers. The information sheet describes briefly the purpose of the study and your activity and rights as a participant.

**Please do not sign this consent form until you have read the information sheet and you have been given satisfactory answers to any questions that you may have about this research.**

Thank you very much for your time.  
Sandra Roper

Do you agree to take part in this study?

YES/NO

Signed.....

Date.....

Printed name.....

***The researcher can be contacted at:***

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### **Interview Guide – Stepmothering (including prompts)**

**1. Can you tell me about your family and how you became a stepmother?**

Possible prompts: How many stepchildren do you have? What are their ages? Boys, girls or both? How long have you been a stepmother? How old were you when you became a stepmother? Do you have biological children? From a previous relationship? Within the current relationship? Do your stepchildren live with you? Full time? Part time? If they don't live with you how often do you see them? Is the biological mother alive? Is she involved with her children.

**2. Do you think of yourself as a stepmother? If not how do you see yourself and how has this changed over time?**

Possible prompts: How do you introduce your stepchildren to other people? How do your extended family feel about your stepchildren? How are they treated? Do you ever worry about being a 'wicked stepmother'?

**3. How do you see your role as a stepmother? And how has this changed over time?**

Possible prompts: In what ways is it the same or different from other mothering experiences you may have had? How do you and your partner make decisions about the children and how do you deal with discipline for your stepchildren? How do you feel about your stepchildren? How do you think they feel about you? Have you ever had problems as a stepmother

dealing with officials (e.g. school, health service). Do you have any contact with the children's other parent? Has your role changed over time? In what ways?

4. **How do you see your family?** Who is part of your family?

5. **How do you think other people view stepfamilies?**

6. **Do you think you have benefited from being a stepmother?**

Possible prompts: How? Do you think there are any disadvantages to being a stepmother? What are they?

7. **Is there any advice you would give to other women planning to become stepmothers?**

Possible prompts: Did you receive any advice? What advice would you have liked to receive? Have you read any self-help books? Were they helpful?

**Is there anything else about your experiences as a stepmother that you'd like to tell me about?**

**List of themes from AtlasTi™**

advising him how to parent

being the perfect stepmum

benefits of stepmothering

Breaking up

Childless but not by choice

Childless by choice

complicated extended families

dad and kids alone

dealing with adversity

decision making

Emotion – being insecure

Emotion- anger and resentment

Emotion – being hurt

Emotion – holding back/being rationale

Emotion - relationships with children

Family culture

Finances/money

Finding a role

grandparenting

He needs my help

Home – invaded

Home – not feeling at home

Housing - space

How father handles children

Jealousy

Legal issues

loss

Loving a stepchild

luck

Mothering as natural

Naming/names

personality of stepchild

Power – lack of

previous stepmothering experience

Prioritising me

relationship with bio mum

Relationships - family

shared history - memories

stepchildren - difficult behaviour

teasing

What is a mother?

## HUMAN PARTICIPANTS AND MATERIALS. ETHICS COMMITTEE (HPMEC) PROFORMA

Please complete and send to:

**John Oates** ([j.m.oates@open.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.oates@open.ac.uk)), Chair,

Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee (HPMEC)

Centre for Childhood Development and Learning (CHDL),

Briggs, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes

**Also send a copy to [Research-ethics@open.ac.uk](mailto:Research-ethics@open.ac.uk)**

If you have any queries before you fill in this form please look at the

Research Ethics (intranet) web site: <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/>

**Title of project**

**A short, descriptive title.**

**Discourses of family and motherhood: The experiences of stepmothers**

**Schedule**

**Time frame for the research and its data collection phase(s).**

Current and ongoing – Literature review

June/July 2010 – Data collection. Analysis of online web forum for stepmothers

August – October 2010 – Data collection. Pilot interviews with 3 stepmothers

November 2010 – May 2011 – Data collection. Further interviews with stepmothers

January 2011 – June 2011 - Prepare probationary report

January 2011 – December 2011 – Transcription and data analysis



January 2012 - June 2013 – data analysis and writing up

### **Abstract**

A summary of the main points of the research, written in terms easily understandable by a non-specialist and containing no technical terms.

This project aims to explore discourses relating to family and mothering, and the ways in which these are used by stepmothers to explain their subjective experiences. A previous study conducted by the researcher (Roper, 2007) suggested that women's perspectives on the experience of being a stepmother are culturally informed by discourses idealizing motherhood and the biological nuclear family and that such constructions must be challenged if the particular problems faced by stepmothers are to be alleviated.

This project is therefore concerned with the experiences of stepmothers and with discourses of family and motherhood within the psychological literature and in social policy. It will explore the relationship between these two spheres and the wider discourses of family and mothering that provide the discursive resources which stepmothers draw on to make sense of their experiences.

### **Source(s) of funding**

Details of the external or internal funding body (e.g. ESRC, MRC).

Self-funded

### Justification for research

What contribution to knowledge, policy, practice, and people's lives the research will make?

Much of the research on remarriage and stepfamilies has focussed on the impact of marital breakdown and remarriage on child development with less research on the stepparent role and more studies of stepfathers than stepmothers (Coleman, Ganong and Fine 2000, Orchard & Solberg, 1999). There is little research looking specifically at the experiences of stepmothers and research on non-residential stepmothers is particularly sparse (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, Doodson & Morley, 2006). However, several researchers have commented on the greater difficulties that are apparent for women in the stepparenting role (e.g. Bernstein, 1989; Smith, 1990; Visher & Visher, 1979; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

By providing a better understanding of the variety of ways in which stepmothers claim to perceive and experience their role, and by challenging dominant constructions of motherhood and family that may impact on stepmothers, this research is intended to benefit stepmothers and perhaps provide a step towards developing a 'non-traditional family' theory. Just as 'queer theory' is a theoretical paradigm aiming to destabilize social norms and practices that present heterosexuality as natural and correct (Gough & McFadden, 2001), such a theory might usefully challenge the hegemony of nuclear biological families in the same manner.

### Investigators

Give **names** and **units** of all persons involved in the collection and handling of individual data. Please name **one** person as **Principal Investigator** (PI).

Sandra Roper (PI)

### Published ethical guidelines to be followed

For example: BERA, BPS, BSA (see Research Ethics web site for more information).

BPS (British Psychological Society)

### Location(s) of data collection

Give details of where and when data will be collected. If on private, corporate or institutional premises, indicate what approvals are gained/required.

Stage 1 -

#### **Online web forum**

The data source is a discussion forum on a website for stepmothers; [www.childlessstepmums.co.uk](http://www.childlessstepmums.co.uk). The intention is to analyse data from one or more discussion threads arising during a period of one month, using discourse analysis to explore the ways that discourses of family and mothering are drawn on by stepmothers in discussing their experiences.

I will obtain the agreement of the website owner and post a message on the site advising users that I have joined the forum as a researcher (and as a stepmother myself) and will be researching some discussion threads during a specified period of one month. Information about the purpose of the research will be included and participants will be offered the opportunity to contact me and my supervisor by email if they would like further information. This allows forum users to avoid posting during the period of research and thus gives the implied consent of those who continue to post. I recognise that this may not be fully informed consent as I cannot be certain that all users will have read the message. Therefore, in order to ensure informed consent for any quotations used in the analysis I will contact individual members (via the website owner) to gain their permission to use their postings in this way, thus also giving them the opportunity to withdraw at this stage.

Stage 2

#### *Interviews*

Where participants are not known to me, interviews will be carried out in a safe environment such as the University. This may be less comfortable for participants than being interviewed in their own homes and I will therefore need to ensure that they are put at ease prior to the interview.

### Participants

Give details of the population from which you will be sampling and how this sampling will be done.

British stepmothers – defined as any woman married to or in a partnership relationship with someone who has children from another relationship.

Participants for the semi-structured interviews will be volunteers recruited using snowball sampling, supplemented if necessary with advertising on a web forum for stepmothers ([www.childlessstepmums.co.uk](http://www.childlessstepmums.co.uk)). The objective is to access as diverse a sample as possible.

## Recruitment procedures

How will you identify and approach potential participants?

Volunteers will be contacted by email and phone.

## Consent

Give details of how informed consent will be gained and attach copies of information sheet(s) and consent form(s). Give details of how participants can withdraw consent and what will happen to their data in such a case (see the Research Ethics web site for an advisory document).

### ***Interview participants***

In addition to discussing the research with participants prior to the interview, each participant will also receive an information sheet (Appendix 1 attached) detailing the purpose of the research, the way that anonymity/confidentiality will be preserved, their rights not to answer specific questions and to withdraw from the research. The information sheet will also explain the reasons for recording the interview and remind them that they will have an opportunity to see and comment on the transcript. In addition the information sheet will provide my contact details should they wish to ask any further questions about the research. For my own protection such contact details will be the University address and my University email address. The information sheet will include the addresses of two organisations that offer support and advice to stepparents (see Appendix I). Once the participant has read the information sheet and been given an opportunity to discuss any concerns, they will be asked if they are willing to participate and to sign a consent form (Appendix 1 attached).

### ***Web forum***

Collecting data from an online web forum is a form of Internet Mediated Research (British Psychological Society, 2007) and has been likened to becoming an electronic ethnographer (Schrum, 1995). This raises specific ethical issues of privacy (level of identifiability) and informed consent (level of observation) (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002, BPS, 2007). In order to address these I have considered the suggestions of Sharf (1999), Mann and Stewart (2000), Ferri (2000), Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002 and the guidelines of the BPS (2007). Mann and Stewart (2000) raise the question of distinguishing between public and private sources - is a narrative public property if it appears on a public discussion forum? Ferri (2000) suggests that it is important to consider the intended audience and whether this includes a researcher. This is also suggested in the BPS (2004) guidelines on observation where, without consent, observation of public behaviour should take place only where people could 'reasonably expect to be observed by strangers'. In order to address this issue and avoid deception, I will obtain the agreement of the website owner and post a message on the site advising users that I have joined the forum as a researcher (and as a stepmother myself) and will be researching some discussion threads during a specified period of one month. Information about the purpose of the research will be included and participants will

be offered the opportunity to contact me and my supervisor by email if they would like further information. This allows forum users to avoid posting during the period of research if they choose and thus gives the implied consent of those who continue to post. I recognise that this may not be fully informed consent as I cannot be certain that all users will have read the message. Therefore, in order to ensure informed consent for any quotations used in the analysis I will contact individual members (via the website owner) to gain their permission to use their postings in this way, thus also giving them the opportunity to withdraw at this stage.

## Methodology

### Outline the method(s) that will be employed to collect and analyse data.

Data will be gathered from participants via an online web forum and through approximately 12 semi-structured interviews.

For the web forum data will be transcribed from one or more threads during a specified period.

For the interviews an audio recorder will be used. I will ask the participant's permission to record the interview. Interviews will then be transcribed.

All the data gathered from participants and the literature will be analysed discursively recognising the ways in which language constructs objects, subjects and experiences, including subjectivity and a sense of self (Willig, 1999, Potter & Wetherell, 1992).

## Data Protection

### Give details of registration of the project under the DP Act and the procedures to be followed re: storage and disposal of data to comply with the Act. Please note OU guidance on the Research Ethics FAQ page - <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/strategy-unit/offices/ethics/faqs.shtml#p6>.

All the stepmothers who volunteer to participate will be assured that they will not be identified in the report (pseudonyms will be used) and that only the researcher and her supervisors will see any identifying information. To maintain anonymity participants will be allocated a number and only this will appear on interview transcripts with participant details held separately in a secure file.

For the web forum analysis forum members are identified only by pseudonyms but in order to ensure that these cannot be traced back to the individual, I will take account of the BPS (2007) guidelines and treat these as if they were a person's real name, i.e. I will use a further pseudonym at the point of data collection in addition to gaining permission to use their postings in the research.



### Recompense to participants

Normally, recompense is only given for expenses and inconvenience, otherwise it might be seen as coercion/inducement to participate. Give details of any recompense to participants.

None planned.

### Deception

Give details of the withholding of any information from participants, or misrepresentation or other deception that is an integral part of the research. Any such deception should be fully justified.

No deception will be used. The purpose of the research will be discussed with participants.

### Risks

Detail any foreseen risks to participants or researchers and, based on a risk assessment, the steps that will be taken to minimise/counter these. If the proposed study involves contact with children or other vulnerable groups, please confirm that an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Disclosure has been obtained for each person involved in these contacts.

Taking part in such a study inevitably requires participants to reflect on their experiences and such reflection may cause distress if it leads to recognition of problems. I will tell participants that as a stepmother myself I am aware that discussion of their experiences may be difficult or distressing and remind them that they may refuse to answer a question, or withdraw entirely without giving a reason. I will also explain that the information sheet provides details of organisations (Parentline Plus and Relate – see Appendix I) that can offer advice and support for stepparents.

Where I do not know participants, interviews will be carried out in a safe environment such as the University (for my own protection). This may be less comfortable for participants than being interviewed in their own homes and I will therefore need to ensure that they are put at ease prior to the interview.

### Debriefing

**Give details of how information will be given to participants after data collection to inform them of the purpose of their participation and the research more broadly.**

In order both to debrief participants in the web forum, and to recognise their contribution as co-constructors of the research I will make the results of this element of my research available to participants either via the childless stepmums website or by asking members to contact me (by email).

Interview participants will be offered the opportunity to read the transcript of their interview, to comment on it and, if they choose, to modify it as I see them as co-constructors of the research.



### Declaration

Declare here that the research will conform to the above protocol and that any significant changes or new issues will be raised with the HPMEC before they are implemented.

A Final Report form will need to be filled in once the research has ended (you will be contacted by HPMEC on the date for final report below).

#### Contact details

Name Sandra Lyn Roper

Unit \_\_\_\_\_

Address 44 Sir John Pascoe Way, Duston, Northampton NN5 6PQ

Telephone 01604 754952

E-mail slroper@aol.com

Signature(s) Sandra Roper  
(this can be the typed name(s) of investigator(s) if electronic copy is submitted (which is preferred))

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Proposed date for  
Final Report \_\_\_\_\_

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